

Editorial

What if the blessing doesn't come?

Since returning to Scotland nine months ago, I have become increasingly aware of a sense of disillusionment and fear among many ministers and other church leaders. Secularism, unbelief and a disappearing of the Christian consensus in many areas, including the sexual, provide a bleak backdrop for the work of the gospel. Church decline seems inexorable, and, apart from a few exceptions, evangelical churches are declining as well. In spite of decades of faithful preaching and praying the tide does not appear to be turning.

My last editorial in the November issue appealed for us to think in terms of 'turning the tide' rather than 'holding the fort'. This editorial is not a withdrawal of that, rather an attempt to face up to that most disturbing of questions, 'What if the blessing doesn't come?' I want us to face honestly the formidable problems and obstacles. This letter is relevant to us all in our work of ministry, but I hope it will

particularly speak to those who are faithfully doing the Lord's work and seeing little fruit, and perhaps even seeing the situation grow worse.

This will not be cheap advice. There is nothing easier than to stand outside a situation and, with second-hand knowledge, offer quick and easy fixes. Indeed, many in situations of great pressure are reluctant to ask for advice, knowing that what they will get will often be based on the assumption that they are responsible for the situation, and that if they did things differently - in other words the way the person advising does them - the desert would blossom like the rose.

Let's make no bones about it. We all have our faults and weaknesses. We all have quirks of temperament and personality. These are seldom the root cause for the spiritual wasteland we often face. Most ministers I know are painfully conscious of their failings, and bring these to the Lord and ask his grace as they battle with them. In such

Contents

- 1 Editorial
- 6 Evangelical Statesmanship
David F Wright
- 11 The Power in Preaching
David Jackman
- 14 Church Today?
Nigel Barge
- 19 Follow the Lord Fully
Robert Murray McCheyne
- 24 The Minister as Theologian
Bob Fyall
- 29 Bob Fyall meets
Ann Allen
- 32 Book Reviews

circumstances simply to be told that if you did things differently all would be well is likely to change gloom into despair. What I want to do in this editorial is to look at five myths which are profoundly unhelpful, and then make some tentative suggestions. Myths always have some truth in them, that is why they become myths, but I am concerned that collectively and used unthinkingly these can crush people who are already struggling.

It takes time

There is truth here. We cannot expect to go into a situation and revolutionise it overnight. But if the months and years pass and spiritual life seems far away as ever, what then? The first thing that needs to be said is that the phrase is fundamentally wrong. It does not 'take time', it takes God. All that time does is passes; it is not something magic. It is true that God usually works gradually through means, but there are golden moments when he acts in a spectacular way and we call it 'miraculous'. We must not imagine if we have toiled all night and caught nothing that the Lord may not have a miraculous catch ready in the morning. Read again in Luke 5:1-11 when exactly that happens. The story is remarkably encouraging. The obvious point is that the Lord spectacularly provided a catch to people who had toiled long and fruitlessly. What is often ignored is that the other point of this story is that Jesus knows more about fishing than the fishermen do. Jesus knows more about ministry than we do; after all it is his ministry. It's not a question of taking time, rather it is about a daily relationship with the Lord. Blessing, undreamed of, may be round the corner.

If you love people they will respond

It hardly needs to be said that there is clearly some truth here. No one responds well to people who clearly do not care for them. Yet it is too facile. For one thing, responding well to you

Jesus knows more about fishing than the fishermen do. Jesus knows more about ministry than we do; after all it is his ministry

as an individual is not the same as coming to a living faith. We can all think of people with whom we get on well who are no nearer to Christ than they were when we first met them. Indeed they may use their personal friendship with you as an evasion of ever engaging with the gospel. Moreover, some people's idea of love is that you treat them like children, indulging every whim and avoiding anything like confrontation. We must realise we all have different temperaments, and God uses us as ourselves. Some of us are too keen to fight and we can easily mistake aggressiveness for faithfulness. Some of us are too unwilling to fight and say that it is wrong to take sides. We must realise which side of the spectrum we tend towards and try to avoid its excesses. I know few ministers who do not have a genuine love for people. However, many get utterly discouraged when their best efforts are misunderstood and misrepresented, and warmth and gentleness are met with hostility and suspicion. Not everyone will respond, however much you love. Jesus was rejected by those he loved and came to save. When you meet hostility and even hatred you are beginning to share something of 'the fellowship of his sufferings' (Philippians 3:10).

If you preach well you will save people

Of course there is preaching which is deadly dull and preachers who, after three minutes, make you lose the will to live. Likewise there is a genuine hunger for good preaching and many who will welcome and benefit from it. Yet the idea that if you preach with power, winsomeness and relevance will automatically lead to growing congregations and warm-hearted response is

there is preaching which is deadly dull and preachers who, after three minutes, make you lose the will to live

surely wrong. The more effectively you preach the more people will see the need to change. Some will respond; others will hate you more for preaching well than for preaching badly. Preaching which is dull can be safely ignored and people can sit in a comfortable fog and never be challenged. Nor is it true to say that if you preach the love of Christ people's hearts will melt. I remember in the early days of my ministry that the message of unconditional love of Christ was the one which caused deepest offence. If people do not believe in grace, they will be enraged by a message which means that all they can contribute to their salvation is their sinfulness. Ultimately many people do not want to go to heaven when they discover they have to sing 'worthy the Lamb' when what they want to sing is 'worthy am I'. Preach the love of Christ, but do not be surprised if it is met with resentment rather than gratitude.

Others are finding it more difficult

This is in many respects true. The persecuted church in some parts of the world is facing intimidation, violence and death itself. Moreover, many people in our congregations are facing relentlessly pressurised working lives to say nothing of personal tragedies. That is all undeniable, but as a pastoral strategy to help discouraged ministers it is disastrous for at least two reasons. First, we can know the external pressures on someone, or at least some of them. What we cannot know are the battles being fought with the world, the flesh and the devil. Outwardly all may appear well. The provision of a manse, a regular salary, other resources and support groups

may appear attractive. But the manse is a tied house and the minister may have no provision for retirement; the salary is probably much less than otherwise would have been possible and the 'support' group may be a mutual admiration society where someone struggling will be reluctant to confess failure.

Second, comparisons of the above kind are as unhelpful as comparisons in the opposite direction. There will always be others who seem to be having a much easier time. Comparing ourselves to those worse off will induce guilt; to those better off, resentment. The truth is that God knows where he has called us and he is in control of all that happens.

It's nothing personal

Again, there is a deep underlying truth here. We need to remember God's words to Samuel, 'It is not you that they have rejected, but they have rejected me' (1 Sam. 8:7). If it is truly Christ we are presenting, then it is not ourselves but him who is being rejected. However, only the most insensitive could fail to be deeply hurt by deliberately malicious and thoughtless remarks. When attacks are personalised and linked to your own practice, temperaments and behaviour, it is difficult not to take these 'personally'. This is exacerbated, if the attack is made in the course of a meeting and others who know better connive at it by their silence. This does not mean that ministers are always right, but it does mean that if they are ministering sincerely and honestly, and are conscious of much failure, they do deserve the prayerful support of others rather than jibes about being unable to take criticism.

In 2 Corinthians, the letter in which Paul most passionately and movingly speaks of the many hardships of his ministry, he asks, 'Who is equal to such a task?' (2:16). The work of the ministry seems to become ever more difficult, exacerbated by the kinds of pressures I have already outlined. There are no easy solutions and I do

not want to fall into the trap of lecturing others on what they ought to be doing. I do, however, want to suggest six principles which may help some, particularly if they are struggling with the kind of issues I have raised.

1. Don't lose confidence in God's

word. In the midst of the battle remember that when the Bible is unfolded Christ is presented to people. Paul, again in 2 Corinthians, tells us that some will smell the gracious 'aroma of Christ' (2:15) and will turn to him. Others, however, will smell the stench of death (2:16) and will hate you for it. If you are in a situation where that second response is the most prominent, then remember that the preaching is having an effect. Feed yourself on God's Word, and, even if no-one else is responding, then you will be growing more like Christ.

2. Remember you are not the

Messiah. It would be an entirely good thing if ministers stopped using phrases such as 'my people' and 'my parish'. That is assuming the role of Christ himself. If we are 'doing well' that can lead to pride and a sense of indispensability. If we are struggling with failure it can lead to despair and a crippling sense that we are solely responsible for the health of the church. 'Feed the church of God which he has purchased with his own blood', said Paul to the Ephesian elders (Acts 20: 28). The ministry suffers from today's lack of respect for authority figures. Many find themselves in that worst of all situations – put on an unrealistic pedestal and expected to have no faults, and yet deprived of the authority given in a more deferential age. That kind of authority, derived from status rather than gift, was wrong and we must not make life more difficult for ourselves by coniving with bogus ideas of ministerial status.

3. Try to pray with a trusted

friend. This may not always be possible. You may have had the experience of sharing confidences with someone you imagined you could trust, and

Feed yourself on God's Word, and even if noone else is responding, then you will be growing more like Christ

then, to your dismay, heard your confidence abused as people said, 'so and so is having problems'. The devil wants to prevent people praying; if he can't do that, how delicious it is for him to see prayer times turned into thinly-disguised gossip sessions. There is a lesson for us all here. If we receive confidences we must keep them. We are not good at providing safe places where people can reveal their vulnerabilities without fear of these becoming the topic of gossip. If you can find a soul mate that is a true gift of God.

4. Don't neglect your family.

Part of the relentless pressure which leads to stress and burnout is the unbiblical idea that if there is a need, then the minister must meet it. This often leads to neglect of spouse and family. If you are married you made vows to your spouse as well as to your congregation. If you are a parent God has given you the responsibility of caring for these young lives. We need to make time for our families, not as an extra chore, but as an indispensable part of our lives.

5. Don't be too hard on yourself.

Discipline is part of Christian living as we resist the devil and his allies in our own fallen nature. But, two words of caution. Whatever disciplines we may adopt are a matter for the Lord and ourselves and are not for public display, especially if used as a stick with which to beat others. Secondly, we must avoid a kind of pseudo-spirituality which tries to be holier than God. God knows our frailty and we do the cause of Christ no service if we do not likewise recognise our own weakness. Find a place to which you can retreat from time to time and allow the Spirit to renew you.

6. Be open to new possibilities.

If you are in a situation which is particularly hard and fruitless, it may be that God is calling you on to something else. It may not be, and only walking with God and listening to his voice will help you to decide. There is certainly no justification for running away at the first difficulty; nor is there for stubbornly staying on when other possibilities begin to open. It is no less wrong to stay when God wants you to go as to go when he wants you to stay. If you are certain you are where God has called you, then look to him for further grace and blessing.

Above all remember that God loves you and has good purposes for you. Rutherford House's motto is *Encouraging Effective Ministry* and it is part of its purpose to try to help those who are finding ministry difficult. I would welcome opportunities to listen to and speak with any who want to share their experiences, and to talk and pray through some of the issues raised here.

The words of Paul speak powerfully into all our situations of ministry: 'Be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord, your labour is not in vain'. (1 Cor. 15: 58)

**See 'Note from the Editor'
– next page**

Note from the Editor

As I said in the last edition of the Journal the whole purpose of this publication is to help people involved in church and ministry; we welcome comments and suggestions both on its contents and on areas we may be neglecting.

The Editorial tries to address the sense of failure and foreboding which is so much part of the Christian scene, and I hope this will lead to discussion and helpful debate. The article on *The Minister as Theologian* is a version of a talk given recently at the Crieff Fellowship.

One of the issues we wrestle with as evangelicals is our relationship with the national church. David Wright's article on *Evangelical Statesmanship*, also originally given at Crieff, helpfully guides our thinking and I hope will also lead to further thinking. Nigel Barge in *Church Today* thinks through what it means to be a church true to Scripture and engaging with culture.

David Jackman, Director of the Proclamation Trust, in *The Power in Preaching*, which originally appeared in *PT Media*, calls us to truly biblical preaching. Again there is much food for thought. This journal is committed to the centrality of preaching, and from time to time we have printed a sermon from a giant of an earlier generation, not that we might imitate their style but rather catch something of their vision. *Follow the Lord Fully* is a stirring sermon from Robert Murray McCheyne on another visionary figure, Caleb.

Over the years one of the most interesting features of the Journal has been *Ann Allen meets....* This time it is her turn to be interviewed, and I'm sure readers will find her comments fascinating and challenging.

Evangelical Statesmanship

David F Wright

My subject is the craft or style or practice of being an evangelical minority in a mixed Church. I have not attempted to ground it explicitly in Scripture, and hence can claim for what I say no authority beyond that of reflective experience – perhaps what the Bible sometimes calls ‘wisdom’. I am aware of the danger that it may be too close to an *apologia pro vita mea* of over a third of a century in a mixed faculty of Divinity, and for that reason be in need of correction. But perhaps the perspectives I have gained partly in that context may be relevant to others in very different situations.

My remarks relate largely to the Church of Scotland, and will be less relevant to other Churches in Scotland and to the Presbyterian Church in Ireland in which evangelicals are not in a minority. It should be said, in passing, that concentration on minority existence should not be taken to imply a belief that, if or when evangelicals become a majority, all will be plain sailing! We will then need to return to this subject, with perhaps more acute urgency.

This evangelical statesmanship is essentially a churchly skill or virtue

within a connexional or corporate Church, such as the Church of Scotland or the Church of England or Methodism. One advantage of independency may be that it has little need of such a virtue! And to the extent to which, in the national Church, we approximate to practical independency it is correspondingly less relevant. We explicitly eschew any suggestion of schism or external separation, but it is quite possible to operate internally as separatists, unwittingly or even deliberately. We avoid as much contact with non-evangelicals as possible, retreat into our congregations and frequent the fraternities of the like-minded, escaping contamination and guilt by association. Perhaps when conservatives were a tiny minority, some resort to a degree of *de facto* independency within the Kirk was essential to survival and quite understandable. But the statesmanship of which I am speaking is not focussed on survival, and is inconsistent with internal separatism.

It consists rather in living as full citizens of the state, unapologetically, unashamedly and comprehensively Church-of-Scotland people. This is where we belong, it is our home, here we have and claim full citizen rights –

and responsibilities. In aspiring to make this an ever greater reality, much will depend on our own outlook and attitudes. How do we, no doubt for the most part unconsciously, see ourselves in relation to the wider Church? There is scope here for a healthy dose of self-knowledge.

Broad-church people may well view us as oddballs whose true place is not in the national Church: we are ‘fundies’ who ought to join up with the Free Church or Free Presbyterians, or in many cases crypto-Baptists who should honourably resign and join the local credobaptist fellowship, or gospel-folk who properly belong to the city mission or the Salvation Army or some other non-ecclesial group. Well, we cannot stop the birds flying over our heads (and even depositing their droppings on us), but we can prevent them making nests in our hair. We must not believe what others believe about us. We must not acquiesce in the identity they assign us. Let us get such labels and characterizations clean out of our hair.

And most certainly we must not behave as though they were right and allow ourselves to be pushed out on to the fringe. We must rise above the es-

capism that will unwittingly confirm the verdict others pass on us. There is all the difference in the world between acknowledging that in the present Church of Scotland (but not in the world-wide church) ours is a minority stance, and concurring in thought or practice with the verdict that it is eccentric and even illegitimate. Experience suggests that not all of us have always refused to let others assign us our place and our identity. It is possible to sell the pass at this psychological level. If you give any house-room to the notion that you are queer, the chances are that you will begin to act queerly too. There is after all a strange but genuine comfort in being a wallflower if you find dancing excruciating. A marginalized oddbod is not often called to assume taxing responsibilities. This is where healthy self-knowledge is important.

Much more could be said on this basic point. Do we in reality move more in the company of other evangelicals than in Church of Scotland circles? In recent years many Evangelicals in the Church of England have stressed that they are not evangelicals who happen to be also Anglicans but as much Anglicans as they are evangelicals. They have unambiguously abandoned any notion that they are in the established Church because it is 'a good boat to fish from'. In accordance with the ordination pledge to seek the good of the Church, evangelicals of a statesmanlike mind are called to cherish and honour the Church rather than merely use it, and to rise to their full height as Church of Scotland people concerned for 'the whole state of Christ's Church'. This assumes commitment to the Church of Scotland that is longterm, full-time, whole-hearted, with fullness of spirit and mind.

What will this require in practice? I make six points, out of many more that could be made:

1. Presence and Involvement

The essential minimum is that we be Presbytery-people (and when occasion

offers Assembly-people), and also committee-people. And this means not a mere token presence but active contributory participation which will call for preparation by prayer, thought and consultation, and is not possible without expenditure of time and effort.

The evangelical case too often goes by default; it is simply not heard. This may be decreasingly so in Presbyteries but is still too common, despite our growing numbers, in other contexts,

There is after all a strange but genuine comfort in being a wallflower if you find dancing excruciating

not least the various courses and conferences organized by central agencies or Presbytery Committees. Excuses are easily made, normally in the assumption, spoken or unspoken, that these occasions will be a waste of time because as often as not their very starting-point is misguided. Whether this is true or not, others will attend and will be influenced by them. Absentee evangelicals will have no opportunity of influencing participants, who may well be crying out for light and encouragement. Statesmanship must aim to influence others and that requires us to be where others are. Such involvement may even have a sacrificial dimension for us.

2. A Readiness to 'Get our Hands Dirty'

There is no alternative to operating in messy situations where we have not set the agenda and will not have the final word (and where the practice of submitting minority reports is not established). In such muddled waters we will have to steer by such maxims as 'half-a-loaf is better than no bread', and 'the lesser of two evils'. I doubt if statesmanship is compatible with an all-or-nothing mentality. The reforming campaigns of Shaftesbury illustrate the kind of gradualism we may need: better a law that allows, for example,

excessive working hours for children than totally unregulated licence. One person's gradualism is another person's compromise, and compromise may bring discomfort and even guilt-feelings.

3. A Distinction between First-Order and Second-Order Issues

In practice we probably all function with some such distinction. We know what issues we would resign over! But perhaps we need to think further about the distinction, for it relates not solely to resignation. It helps to determine what we get worked up about, where we expend our spiritual and intellectual and emotional energy, what we can live with, how we fix our priorities. From time to time I receive requests for help from individuals concerned about this or that question. Not infrequently these are of such an order that part of my counsel is that they should not be losing too much sleep over them.

The particular dividing-line that we draw between first-order and second-order issues is unlikely to be applicable universally or permanently. This explains why some who have scruples about women as ministers or elders apparently have no qualms about sending and supporting women missionaries who may almost be running churches overseas.

Remaining in a church which ordains women as elders, deacons and ministers may be uncomfortable or distressing for someone who views this as a first-order issue which the church has settled wrongly. Squaring one's conscience by citing considerations – which mitigate the offence ('the church changed the rules after I was ordained'; 'the church is imperfect and we must work for the reformation') tend to suggest that it is perhaps not a

first-order matter after all. We recall that evangelicals are not themselves agreed about the import of relevant scriptural passages on women's roles. It must be difficult to function in a statesmanlike way if one's convictions require us to shun ordained women in the Kirk. These reflections indicate that even a distinction between first-order and second-order concerns may be inadequate. A three-fold ordering may prove more serviceable. I am more inclined to believe that a two-fold distinction is sufficient. The tricky business is not so much prioritising as determining how to act with integrity if a first-order principle is breached.

The distinction is likely to be drawn at a different point in a frontier missionary context than in the setting of a predominantly Christian society. The task of the Church in Scotland is in process of changing from the chiefly pastoral to the chiefly missionary. In some housing-scheme areas (UPAs), the Church is hanging on by its fingernails. In such situations the challenge is not so much to renew and reform an untaught eldership as to find elders at all, male or female. This transitional situation is a very uncomfortable one, with a wide variety of experiences and some dramatically stark contrasts between the strongest and the weakest. The first/second-order divide will fall at different places accordingly.

All of us will endorse the conviction that we must put 'truth before consequences'. Yet some second-order issues of truth can be pursued in such a way as to obscure the magnitude of first-order truth and frustrate the task of vindicating it. If you are going to the stake, make sure you have a big enough cause to die for. Statesmen die only for matters of high principle. In Augustine's pungent axiom it is not being put to death that makes martyrs but the grounds of execution (*martyres non facit poena, sed causa*). The world has little respect for the self-sought martyrdom of the obsessed eccentric, the incurable bee-in-the-bonnet, the hobby-horse that is ridden to death.

The tricky business is not so much prioritising as determining how to act with integrity if a first-order principle is breached

And remember that disappointed would-be martyrs in the early centuries became monks – internal separatists.

Inescapable first-order issues are in my view not far to seek. The cluster of questions grouped under the heading of religious pluralism, with interfaith services and wholesale inclusivist theologies, and the evaluation of the homosexual option are likely to throw up first-order challenges in the near future. The multi-religious challenge will soon be of quite enormous proportions. By comparison the flouting of regulations anent the baptism of infants are of quite secondary, even trifling, significance. This is not to deny that we long for and work for the reform of the whole Church, but priorities and distinctions are inescapable.

4. A Concern for the Whole Church, Extensively and Intensively

The national Church has to live and serve in Drumchapel and Yoker and Raploch and Niddrie Craigmillar as well as in the sweet and lovely suburban Bible belts and the inner-city temples. Evangelical statesmanship must recognise the different demands and methods and approaches called for in these 'Urban Priority Areas' of frontier mission. We must heed the imperatives of contextualization. Read Gordon Palmer's plea for a kind of Christian immigration into his parish in the *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* (first issue of 1992). To be credible the evangelical option must be able to cater for all the widely differing local contexts within the national scene, such as the rural areas which have been experiencing ecclesiastical clearances.

If evangelicals were to 'form the next government, as it were, would we expect the Church and Nation lobby to be disbanded overnight? That will not be on the cards! One of the factors that dissuades others from taking us seriously is the restricted range of our concerns. We are hot on

doctrine and on some issues of personal and social ethics, but our relative indifference to the building of a Christian society is essentially un-Reformed and un-Calvinist. We are in fact dependent within the present Church upon the contributions made by sectors and traditions that do not share our evangelicalism. Perhaps the Lord will not give us a majority until we are better prepared to cater for the wide-ranging demands of being a national Church. Our limited concerns may hold us back – God may hold us back. I believe our evangelicalism will prove more attractive when it is more sensitive and responsive to the needs of the poor, the disadvantaged, the victimized, and the social casualties of a harsh and unequal world.

We have quite magnificently exalted the calling of the ministry of Word and sacraments, but there is no less need for evangelicals to fulfil long-term vocations in other roles the Church's central departments, in the Divinity Faculties, in special contexts like Rutherford House and other key fields such as the media. We must not regard lifelong Christian service in these and similar areas, even for ordained ministers, as second-best to congregational ministry. How strategically urgent is the need for more evangelicals to train for a career in TV! We dare not leave it wholly to others.

5. Character as Essential as Orthodoxy

Getting the doctrine right is not the whole answer. We have been reminded of distressing disciplinary cases and of the primacy of the need for

I believe our evangelicalism will prove more attractive when it is more sensitive and responsive to the needs of the poor, the disadvantaged, the victimised and the social casualties of a harsh and unequal world

grace in all our personal dealings with those with whom we disagree. Have you never flinched at the harshness with which evangelical sentiments are expressed in the correspondence columns of *Life and Work*? Or attended a meeting, perhaps of Presbytery or Assembly, when the clumsy insensitivity of some evangelical brother has made you want to creep into a corner and hide your face? We could call it 'the cringe factor' in ecclesiastical debate. It can queer the pitch for more promising contributions. The truth of Scripture deserves commendation with scriptural holiness, which will woo rather than hector and scold and lash. We can express the profoundest disagreement without descending to offence and vituperation. Style can make a difference and determine whether people actually 'hear' us.

**6. Faithfulness to the Evangel as
Held in Trust for the Whole
Church**

As the Church of Scotland finds itself increasingly facing a missionary task, as it already does in too many places, so the witness of evangelicals who have all along been committed to the gospel and evangelism will come into its own. There is a sense in which we hold the biblical gospel in trust for the wider Church – the apostolic gospel, not our traditions or methods or patterns. To be ready to share that with others who are already beginning to acknowledge, and will do so increasingly, that the Church's first service to a future Scotland must be evangelism, will be a test of our evangelical statesmanship. Meantime, we must let our light shine and our voice be heard – in Presbytery and Assembly, in *Life and Work*, in the press and the media as those whose who claim to stand four-square in the true lineage of Reformed (and catholic) Christianity. Our faith is no private vision but the open revelation of God for the world. Our service of it must give it the breadth and depth and length of his eternal purpose set forth in Christ.

The Power in Preaching

David Jackman, Proclamation Trust

Christ sent me to tell the Good News, and to tell it without using the language of human wisdom, in order to make sure that Christ's death on the cross is not robbed of its power. (1 Cor. 1:17 TEV).

This familiar, but very provocative, verse which opens up the central theme of the first four chapters of 1 Corinthians, has really challenged my thinking of late. Paul's plain meaning is that the way in which the gospel is preached can produce a *kenosis* ('emptying' – same root as Phil. 2:7) of its power or value. That is a startling enough thought in itself, but it becomes even more challenging when we see that this destructive methodology is described by the apostle as (literally) the 'wisdom of speech', or 'words of human wisdom' (NJV). Which of us who preaches the Biblical gospel does not believe that in 'Jesus Christ and him crucified' (2:2) is the very focus of the power and wisdom of God (cf. 1:24)? But which of us does not also find ourselves searching our minds and hearts to know why that power seems comparatively so muted and that wisdom so ridiculed and ignored at this moment in history? Thousands of people crowding into

carol services each Christmas provide the greatest evangelistic opportunity of the year, numerically at least. Thank God for every life touched, and for all the unseen work of the Spirit in convicting, convincing and above all conversion, but why do we see comparatively so little?

Clever Talk and the Power of the Cross Cannot Co-Exist

There are multitudes of answers to such questions – sociological, organisational, communicational, spiritual, etc., with which the Christian press and bookshops are full. The variety of diagnosis and the plethora of quick-fix solutions are overwhelming in their contrariety and complexity; but surely when Scripture speaks directly we must stop and listen, for here is the Lord's own word. And this word says that there is not just a contrast between clever talk and the power of the cross, but a polarity between them. They cannot co-exist. As the paragraph develops the apostle shows that the power of the cross is demonstrated in this, that 'God was pleased through the foolish-

ness of what was preached to save those who believe' (1:21). Salvation, witnessed by the transformed lives of the Corinthian believers, is the demonstration of divine power at work. No other message can save, because there is no other person great enough to accomplish such a task and no other power equivalent to such a massive need. Yet the right message can apparently be evacuated of its saving effects by the wrong methodology.

The root reason for this is that the 'language of human wisdom' is a substitute for faith in God and a resort to the resources and criteria of mere human beings. There is, of course, a specific Corinthian context into which Paul is writing. In his study, *Paul's Theology of Proclamation* (C.U.P.), Dr Duane Litfin, President of Wheaton College, helps us to identify exactly what it was Paul was rejecting so determinedly. Analysing the first-century art of rhetoric, which was so dominant in Greek culture (especially in large cities like Corinth and Thessalonica), he argues that it was not about prose style or audience manipulation. 'It was about the discovery and delivery of ideas and arguments that would engender belief

in the listeners. Given *this* audience and *this* subject matter, how can I achieve the desired result?' Everything depended on the rhetorician's ability to adapt to his audience, understanding their mind-set and so calculating how to produce the desired responses. It is precisely against that methodology that Paul describes and defends his own Corinthian ministry and strategy.

The Power is in the Message, not the Messenger

Nor is this the only location or focus of such a Pauline emphasis. In 1 Cor. 1:22 'miraculous signs' are similarly rejected as confirmatory evidences of the gospel's power to save. In 2:1, he is rejecting 'eloquence or superior wisdom', and again in 2:4, 'wise and persuasive words'. Yet we know from Luke's account of the Corinthian mission that 'every Sabbath he (Paul) reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks' (Acts 18:4). We are not to read the 1 Corinthian texts, then, as a glorying in ignorance or in verbal incompetence, but as a deliberate rejection of any confidence in human methodology, particularly that which was demanded and conditioned by the secular culture. The all-too-present danger was that their 'faith' might rest on men's wisdom, rather than God's power (2:5), in which case it would not be saving faith.

The same negatives are sprinkled through the opening chapters of the (earlier) first letter to the Thessalonians, the city from which Paul had travelled on to Corinth, via Berea and Athens. Speaking of his preaching in Macedonia he reminded them that it was 'not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit...' (1 Thess 1:5). 'The appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you... We are not trying to please men, but God... We were not looking for praise from men' (1 Thess. 2:3-6). Yet the fruit of these determined negatives is highly impres-

He (Paul) saw it as absolutely critical to the effectiveness of his gospel proclamation, that all his confidence should be in the message and not in the messenger, in God's word and not in his worker

sive. 'When you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe' (1 Thess. 2:13). For Paul, this was clearly no peripheral matter. He saw it as absolutely critical to the effectiveness of his gospel proclamation, that all his confidence should be in the message and not in the messenger, in God's word and not in his worker.

Are We Captive to Pulpit Journalism?

The application to us and our ministries could hardly be more pertinent. From all quarters preachers are urged to put their confidence in 'the language of human wisdom', to allow themselves to be culturally driven so as to be culturally relevant. Shorter sermons, mainly composed of contemporary illustrations, often from the media, films and TV, preferably as humorous and entertaining as possible, are the order of the day, just as their equivalents were in Corinth. The pressure is constant and we need both great discernment and deeply-held Biblical convictions to be able to resist it. It is all too easy to capitulate and drift towards what I would characterise as 'journalistic preaching'. The chilling thought is that if that is our equivalent of the 'wisdom of speech', it cannot co-exist with the power of God.

Perhaps we need to undertake a reality check. How much of our preaching is truly expository of the meaning of the Bible, because we are convinced that the Spirit of God takes

Ultimately people come to believe that anything with a Biblical flavour is what God says

the word of God to do the work of God? How much are we captive to pulpit journalism?

These are some key tests we can and should apply:

- Do I think of my preaching as merely Bible-based, or thoroughly Biblical?
- Do I try to 'do something with the Bible' to benefit the congregation, or do I allow the Bible to do its own unique work, in me first and then in my hearers?
- Does my preaching centre around the issues of the moment (the contemporary agenda), or major on the issues of eternity (God's agenda)?
- Do I take time and care to state and explain clearly the meaning of the passage, within its context, or do I talk about it and around it?
- Is the impression my preaching leaves witty and amusing because of its illustrative content, or powerful and penetrating because of its truth content?
- Do my hearers grow to become preacher-focussed ('What a great communicator!'), or Christ-focussed ('What a glorious Saviour!')?
- Is my preaching life-shaping, preparing myself and my hearers for heaven, or simply ephemeral, like yesterday's journalism, useful for wrapping up fish and chips?

This is not about stylistic preferences, nor is it a plea for a detached and studied antipathy towards the culture in which we are called to live. But we dare not fall into the cultural traps in

which Paul's converts wanted to ensnare him. If we are not teaching the content of Scripture, in our preaching, explaining what the Biblical text actually says and then applying it the way the text applies itself, we actually transfer the authority in the preaching from the word of God to ourselves. We undermine God's truth and set up our own cleverness in its place. Like others before us, when that happens, we have our reward. To quote Haddon Robinson, 'Ultimately people come to believe that anything with a Biblical flavour is what God says. The long-term effect is that we preach a mythology. Myth has an element of truth along with a great deal of puff, and people tend to live in the puff. They live with the implication of implications, and then they discover that what they thought God promised, he didn't promise.' And so the cross of Christ is emptied of its power.

Encouraging One Another in the Task

We all need to keep one another accountable in this great responsibility, to help one another on and to support one another in this most demanding and serious of tasks. Yet what a privilege it is, and what a joy to know that the message of the cross is the power of God!

Church Today?

Nigel Barge, Torrance

'Scripture alone, Faith alone and Always reforming'. These were key tenets of the reformation but do they hold the same sway today?

It is of note that we call ourselves 'The Reformed Church' rather than 'The Reforming Church'. Though changes have occurred in the church over the centuries they generally are quite superficial, e.g. style of music. The basic outline of church life and the social model in which it operates have remained constant. Rather than reforming the church it could be said that we have been simply updating a model that was forged in a bygone era.

Consequently, as far as our practice and understanding of being the Church is concerned, it would appear that much of it bears the mark of tradition rather than Scripture. Undoubtedly, some of these are very old, even dating back to the 2nd Century. Nonetheless, however old they are or good they may have been (and may yet be), they are not from Scripture, and so still need to be evaluated in the light of today's society before being accepted and applied.

The insights we gain from the New Testament about church life are, in general, principles, not specific guidelines. When the Gospel is taken to other cultures and a church is established, the task is then to try and apply these principles directly to the situation at hand, without imposing the practices that were relevant in the 'mother' culture. In the last 50 years our society has changed beyond recognition, and yet the practices of the church have in the main remained fairly static.

It is hard to address this subject in a fresh and detached way as we are all children of a bygone day. One way perhaps of approaching the task might be to imagine a universal bout of Ecclesiastical Amnesia. Picture a situation where everyone in an instant forgot everything they had done together as the church, and the buildings and all other clues disappeared. Believers are left, remembering what we have read in the Bible, but forgetting everything else about 'Church'.

The challenge would be one of applying the principles we read in the Bible directly to the society in which we live today. If we did this, how would we answer the following ques-

tions – 'Who is Church and how do you become part of the church? What does the church do together and what constitutes church? How does the church worship?'

If we were able to detach ourselves in such a way I believe we would come up with an outline of church life that would be quite different from the one we have today. Whatever the conclusions drawn from such an exercise surely should be the basis of the goals that we aim for in reforming church life.

Perhaps if we used the plumbline of *sola scriptura* in evaluating current church practices, we might find more liberty to discover a form of church life that was true to the Word but that suited the culture around us.

Confessions concerning Church

Below are a series of 'confessions' drawn from questions about our understanding of the church and aspects of its life in our society today. The aim of these is to promote thought and discussion. The verses given are not proof

texts, but a starting points for deliberation!

'I believe that...'

Where is God in the church's decline?

- God could set everything on earth right immediately but chooses not to. (Matt. 24: 36; 28: 18)
- God sometimes employs evil means to engineer good purposes. (Gen. 50: 20; Acts 2: 23)
- God is prepared to let our church disintegrate. (Rev. 2: 6)
- The church needs reformation before revival. (Luke 5: 36-39)

Who is the church?

- Conversion is an a-biblical concept (2 Cor. 5: 17; Eph. 2: 4,5) and an a-biblical term. (John 1: 12; 3: 18; Acts 5: 15; 9: 42)
- Church is the relationship between two or more people in which Jesus is at the centre. (Matt. 18: 20)
- A church is a group of believers in Jesus, who meet together in His name. (Rom. 16: 5)
- Church discipline is effected by disassociation. (2 Thess. 3: 14; 1 Cor. 5: 12)
- God has people who don't 'come to church'. (Gen. 15: 6; Acts 18: 10)
- Church is meant to consist of diverse sorts of people relating together e.g. a body. (1 Cor. 12: 12)
- The Church will one day be complete and ready for Jesus, e.g. a bride. (Rev. 19: 7)

How do church worship?

- Sunday is a sabbath, not 'The Sabbath'. (Gen. 2: 3; Luke 23: 56)
- The Sunday 'service' has become a protestant mass.
- The Sunday Service is only a minor aspect of our worship of Jesus. (Rom. 12: 1; Matt. 21: 28)
- The only things that please God about us is our faith in Jesus. (Heb. 10: 5; 11: 6; Is. 64: 6)
- The 'priesthood of the preacher' obstructs many from knowing God personally. (Heb. 8: 11)
- The contemporary use of the word 'Preaching' is a-biblical. (Eph. 4: 11;

Acts 8: 4-5, 25)

- God is less concerned with what we do, than how we do it. (1 Thess. 4: 3; 5: 16-18)

What do church do?

- Church life is characterised by the sharing together of Bible teaching, practical care, hospitality and prayer. (Acts 2: 42)
- The Bible is a manual not an album. (2 Tim 3: 16)
- The ministry of the evangelist is to equip others to evangelise, not to do it for them. (Eph. 4: 12)
- Every one of the church should be an apostle, a prophet, an evangelist, a pastor and a teacher. (Eph. 4: 11)
- All believers have access to God, and all may bring out the blessing of God for others. (Heb. 10: 19; 1 Pet. 2: 9; Num. 6: 22)
- No church in the NT is reported to have had 'a minister'. (Acts 13: 1; 14: 23; 20: 17)
- Church structure and organisation exists only to help members do things together that they would find hard to do as individuals.
- God intends us to enjoy the Christian life. (Phil. 4: 4)
- There need be no 'personality clashes' in the church. (John 13: 34; Rom. 5: 5)
- We talk more about prayer than do it.
- God is willing to do much more than we are willing to let him. (Eph. 3: 20; Matt. 7: 7-11; Jas. 4: 2-3)

How do church relate to the world?

- The church should enjoy the favour of the people around them. (Acts 2: 47)
- The church should expect antagonism from some in positions of religious and civil authority. (John 15: 20; 2 Tim. 3: 12)
- Pulpit expository preaching is not an effective form of evangelism in the society of today. (Acts 17: 7; 18: 6)
- The church today operates in such a way that it indulges its members and excludes outsiders.

• The church today is pro-culture in its morals and beliefs and counter-culture in its structures and social traditions.

- Those in the church often have less faith in the power of their prayers than those outside it.
- Atheists and agnostics should want to join the church for the 'fringe benefits' of being part of it.
- Bringing unbelievers amongst the church is an effective start in evangelism. (John 13: 35)

My part in church?

Evangelicals are the natural descendants of the Pharisees. (Luke 18: 11,12; John 5: 39)

- Being a Christian leader doesn't necessarily mean you belong to Jesus. (Matt. 7: 21-23)
- Some of my theology is wrong. I just don't know which bits! (1 Cor. 13: 9)

Implications for church

The following are some implications for church drawn from the statements 'I believe...'. The goal is to set aside current practices and try to establish the principles for church life described in the New Testament.

Church membership

1. The requirements

- a. Belief in Jesus / acceptance of the message of the Gospel. cf. Acts 2: 41; 4: 4; 5: 14; 8: 12; 11: 21; 14: 1)
- b. Commitment to believers / to meet together in his Name. cf. Acts 2: 44; Rom. 16: 5; Heb. 10: 25

2. Initiation (cf. Baptism, Acts 2: 41; 8: 36-38; 10: 47; 16: 33)

- a. Instant and on request – they joined and then were instructed. There was no judgement on their suitability before the church admitted them.
- b. Context of initiation – the believer, the witness / baptiser, God.

3. Continuation by –

- a. Will of the individual to be involved.
- b. Will of others to associate with the individual.

Church meetings

1. **Frequency** – Regular and often cf. Acts 2: 46; 20: 7; Heb. 10: 25
2. **Numbers** – 2 to 5000 + cf. Matt. 18: 20; Rom. 16: 5; Acts 4: 4-5, 12

Church activity

1. **Bible teaching**
N.B. Receiving and giving
2. **Fellowship**
N.B. Practical care for one another
3. **Hospitality**
N.B. Eating together
4. **Prayer**
N.B. With and for one another

Church organisation

1. **Social welfare**
cf. Food for widows (Acts 6: 1-4)
2. **Money**
cf. Gifts for church (Acts 2: 34); Collection for others (1 Cor. 16: 1)
3. **Oversight**
cf. Elders appointed in Churches (Acts 14: 23); Council in Jerusalem (Acts 15)
4. **Teaching** (Acts 5: 42; 6: 4)

21st Century Man

What is he LIKE?

1. **Under pressure**
 - a. Work: The drive for productivity makes ever increasing demands on the individual.
 - b. Security: The pattern of life used to be more predictable. Now the uncertainties of tomorrow often crowd out the enjoyment of today.
 - c. Materialism: The increased expectation of and opportunity for material benefit creates a relentless thirst for more possessions.
2. **Lazy**
 - a. Physically: Much of the physical effort of daily life has been assumed by machines. The result is that many choose not to exercise in any way, unless it is associated with the pleasure of a sport.

b. Socially: Entertainment often used to require the participation of others. Now virtual company can be derived from a television without the effort of social interaction.

c. Emotionally: If you need others to live, it requires that you engage in the emotional strain that accommodating them entails. Today individuals are so independent they often choose to walk away from difficulties in relationships – families, marriages or friendships.

d. Spiritually: Though many may pose the big questions about life, most are content to let them lie. Our expectation of the spiritual tends to be restricted to the immediate, that is, help to live in this world rather than any anticipation of that which is to come.

3. Isolated

a. The causes:

- Family disintegration: The average number of people per home is 2.6. Even within that context few meet together long enough to talk.

- Automation: It is possible to travel, shop, work and be entertained without engaging another person.

b. The result: Depression. An increasing number of people are on anti-depressants.

4. Selfish

Our isolation leaves less need to think about others, and more time to think about ourselves. The great question is, 'What's in it for me?' Organisations find it increasingly hard to get volunteers. Public spirit is not in abundance. It tends to be every one for themselves.

5. Open

The great world views are out of fashion. People no longer live within a system of beliefs. They assess everything in isolation. The result of this is that nothing requires to be 'demolished' before new claims are presented. They are open to persuasion.

What does he LOATHE?

1. Authority

Isolation and independence has led to an antipathy to authority. 'I am my own master and do not need anyone else telling me what to do'. The repercussions of this in political, social, family and the church are evident.

2. Commitment

We are very wary of binding ourselves to others in anyway. The reasons for this include –

- a. There is great suspicion of anything that might compromise our independence.

- b. We are afraid that it might preclude us receiving a 'better offer' amidst the many options that life may present to the individual. This leads to marriage being postponed, contracts being shorter and procrastination in many of our major decisions in life.

3. Large social groups

Most people seldom interact socially with a group larger than a few people. To do so, takes us out of our comfort zone, so we tend to avoid clubs, socials, dances, etc. and opt for the company of the TV. In some circumstances, like a family wedding, it is forced upon us. Here we may fleetingly rediscover the pleasure that there may be in the larger social group!

What is he LOOKING FOR?

1. Enjoyment

A minority are masochists! Most seek enjoyment in their lives and are willing to pay highly. Many live and work for the next holiday.

2. Affirmation

We live within a negative culture. This is illustrated by our press. They provide us what we will pay for. We want negative reporting. Our subconscious hope being that if we pull down those in the limelight it may make us feel better about ourselves. It doesn't. As with drinking salt water it merely increases our thirst. In fact, we are

desperate to feel better about ourselves and to be affirmed in our worth.

3. Benefit for children

The one thing that many are prepared to make sacrifices for today is their children. Recognising the difficulties of life as a child today, they are looking for help. Money and time often appear no problem, though they often might be spent unwisely.

4. Spiritual experience

Though the church is in decline, surveys tell us that more people believe in God now than at any time during the last 50 years. 'New Age' religion is big business. Many are aware of their spiritual needs and are seeking to address them.

5. Meaning

How often you hear the question 'Why?' when difficulties present. In the struggle to make sense of events, consolation is sought in the notion that 'It must have been meant to happen'. There is the underlying presupposition that there is a God, he is in control and everything is not pointless.

Strategy to engage

1. The way in

We need to start with where people are and address their perceived needs. This will mean for –

- a. Individuals: Personal friendships – open ended and undemanding of time, that have spiritual power.
- b. Family: Benefits to family life – relationships between couples, encouragement in the household and support in the bringing up of children. NB. Practical and non-committal and time-demanding.

2. The goal

Once engaged and if they believe in Jesus is the goal is that new believers would grow in –

- a. commitment to Jesus and his people.
- b. submission to God and his delegates.
- c. willingness to graft for the glory of God, the common good and the benefit of self.

Torrance?

Observations

1. God is at work amongst us!
2. The congregation on Sunday is large (c 250) and contains a balance of ages, background and sex.
3. The congregation is perceived by outsiders as warm and welcoming.
4. The youth work is first class:
 - a. The Boys Brigade and Girls Brigade have numbers of about 150.
 - b. The Sunday school, etc. (c 70).
 - c. The drama club (c 20).
 - d. The Scripture Union (c 20).
 - e. Crossover (c 30).
 - f. The Summer mission drew in 140 children. It gave them a great week and presented the gospel clearly to them.
5. The programme in each organisation is sound and Biblically based. The staff are uniformly excellent and there are many involved (c 40).
6. There are around 100 people meeting in small groups in the church – house-churches, meristems, prayer tri-plets.
7. The Bible is read widely – over 80 people are currently using the same Bible reading notes in conjunction with Sunday sermons.
8. Fellowship is warm amongst the congregation and there are many practical expressions of care.
9. There is good involvement of the church in the community.
10. The church is well thought of within the village and there is interest in what it is doing.

BUT.....!

1. Very few if any new non-church people have been added to any expres-

sion of church life – Sunday gathering, house-churches, mens' breakfast, meristems, etc. over the last year.

2. Despite a very successful year of youth work, culminating in an excellent summer mission, there are less in the Sunday school this year.

3. Many people work hard in the organisation of the church. On top of already busy lives, there is little slack for building relationships outside the church.

4. Many of the closest relationships our people have are with those at work who have no access to the organisation of the church in Torrance.

5. Throughout the church many opportunities are created for the Gospel, eg. visitors to the café, parents of children involved, friendships with individuals, etc. Very few of these lead to people becoming part of the church.

Conclusions

1. Church life is very impervious to those outside it.
2. The demands on the time of many believers are such that they are discouraged from building friendships with those outside the church.
3. Though many outside are interested in what the church has to offer, they are daunted by its presentation – services, groups, etc.
4. Outsiders are comfortable in engaging with the church within the context of their families and on the one-to-one with its members.

The needs

1. To organise church so that its primary goal is to enable believers to be evangelist, pastors, etc. where they live and work.
2. To minimise the work needed to service the organisation in order to give believers time and space.

3. To engage outsiders where they live – physically and at their point of need, and then to seek to share the Gospel with them.

4. To present church to those not part of it in a form that they will identify with and find it easy to engage with.

Questions for consideration

1. Sundays

- What is the goal of the Sunday service in the overall life of the church?
- Are the current arrangements the best way of achieving it?

2. Youth Work

- What are the goals of our work with youngsters?
- Can we rationalise to avoid duplication?
- Are there ways we can include parents more?

3. Oversight / pastoral care

- What is the primary work of the elder?
- How should we organise to –
 - incorporate the reality that everyone should be involved in pastoring one another?
 - avoid duplication and time wasting from fruitless visiting?

4. Administration

- Do we need a Board and Session?
- How might we reorganise to minimise time wasting and encourage efficiency?
- How would we maintain accountability?

5. Outreach

- What do the members of the church need or want us to do to help them share Jesus with their friends?
- How can we encourage initiative amongst our members where they live and work?

6. Membership

- How can we re-think 'membership' on the basis of participation rather than 'joining' an organisation?
- How might that look in practice?

Defining Church

Before we contemplate any changes in church, it is essential that we are clear on its nature and purpose.

What is church?

The word in Greek is *ekklesia* and means literally 'a calling out'. It is used in Old and New Testaments in the same way.

- In the O.T. in the Septuagint it was used of the congregation of Israel who were being called out to appear before God at the Tent of Meeting.
- In the N.T. it refers to the 'chosen people, royal priesthood, holy nation', people belonging to God who are being 'called out' of darkness into his wonderful light'. (1 Pet. 2: 9)

Unlike Latin and Greek which are built around nouns, in Hebrew thought and language verbs are of primary importance. Thus it is the activity and the people that are the focus of attention, rather than the 'things' that are involved.

In Jewish thought, in using the word *ekklesia*, the emphasis therefore is on the person who calls – God, and the action of those responding – coming together to Him, rather than on an entity that is created.

If we apply this to our understanding of the word 'church', we see it more as something that we 'do' rather than something that is – an institution or an organisation. We could therefore say that church is happening when any believers meet to wait on God and share together the Word, in prayer, Fellowship or the breaking of bread. Thus a definition might be – 'Church is the gathering of two or more people where Jesus is at the centre' (cf. Matt. 18: 20).

What is the Christian life for?

It is not possible to deal with a collective situation of God's people without first addressing the question of God's intent for each individual. However we

define the purpose of the Christian life, it needs to be equally applicable in a situation of solitary confinement or in the company of a throng of fellow-believers. It should also incorporate the fact that God did not create us to 'do' but to 'be' – he wanted a relationship not a slave! The shorter Catechism puts it simply as –

'The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever'.

What is Church for?

Church could be said to be God's provision of relationships between those who are his people. Its application must be an extension of the lives of the individuals and so its aims would be –

- To enjoy God and the relationship that they share with him, together.
- To equip and encourage one another to bring Jesus glory wherever they have been set. (Eph. 4: 12)

Thus we might define the purpose of church / any gathering of God's people as –

'To enjoy God together and to equip and encourage one another for his service'.

What is 'Torrance Parish Church' for?

If church is an activity rather than an organisation, then church is happening every day of the week, throughout our village. Some are small gatherings and some are large but all those that are 'in Jesus name' are church. The organisation, 'Torrance Parish Church', exists to encourage, enable and oversee those who participate in church and so is a means to an end, not an end itself. Our goal therefore is not to build an organisation that people come to enjoy, but rather to envision, equip and encourage our people to 'go out' and enjoy God, and to serve him wherever he has set them.

The Leading Question

The next step is to address the question of how we change the way we 'do church' that conforms to this Biblical understanding and that is relevant to the society of today.

Follow the Lord Fully

A Sermon by Robert Murray McCheyne

But my servant Caleb, because he had another spirit with him, and hath followed me fully, him will I bring into the land whereinto he went and his seed shall possess it. (Num. 14: 24)

The children of Israel lay encamped below Mount Sinai for about a year, during which time God gave them the law and the tabernacle. Moving across the desert with the pillar-cloud before them, they soon came to Kadesh-barnea, on the edge of the desert, and on the border of the promised land.

Here, by God's direction, they sent twelve spies to search the land, and bring back word 'whether the people were strong or weak, few or many; and what the land is that they dwell in, whether it be good or bad; and what cities they be that they dwell in, whether in tents or in strong holds' (Num. 13: 18,19). Accordingly, the spies searched the land from one end to another, going up by the rocky dells of Hebron, and returning by the pleasant vale of Eshcol. After forty days they returned, bearing a cluster of grapes between two upon a staff; also some pomegranates, and some figs. And as

they stood in the midst of assembled Israel, all eyes rested on them, all ears were open to hear their report. The land was good, they said, flowing with milk and honey; but the people were strong, and their cities walled, and very great.

Two men alone of the twelve stood boldly forward – Caleb and Joshua. And Caleb said: 'Let us go up at once, for we are well able to overcome it'. But the people wept that night, and 'bade stone Caleb with stones' (Num. 14: 10). And God was angry, and said that the congregation should die in the wilderness. 'But my servant Caleb, because he had another spirit with him, and hath followed me fully, him will I bring into the land whereinto he went; and his seed shall possess it' (verse 24).

Doctrine: It is a blessed thing to follow the Lord fully.

1. What it is to follow the Lord fully

To follow Christ all our days

This was the way with Caleb; he followed the Lord all his days – he followed him fully. We find it recorded of him, forty years after, when he was an old man of eighty-five, that 'he wholly followed the Lord God of Israel'. He did not follow God for a time, or by fits and starts, but all his days – he followed him fully.

There are many like Lot's wife: who flee out of Sodom for a while. She was greatly alarmed: the angels laid hands upon her, she heard the words of warning, and fled for a time; but she soon gave up, she looked back, and became a pillar of salt. So, many are awakened, and flee for their life: they weep, pray, seek salvation; but they do not hold out. They are allured by an old companion or a favourite lust, and so they draw back.

Many are like those spoken of in John 6:66: They follow Jesus for a time, and are called his disciples; they hear the gracious words that proceed

out of his mouth; but by-and-by some discovery of doctrine or duty is made which offends them. 'From that time many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with Jesus.' It is those who never go back that follow him fully.

Many are like the Galatians: When Paul first preached to them, they received him 'as an angel of God, even as Christ Jesus'. They spoke of the blessedness of being in Christ, and the great salvation. They loved Paul, so that if it had been possible they would have plucked out their own eyes and given them to him (Gal. 4: 15); and yet they did not follow the Lord fully. They were soon removed from the gospel of Christ to another gospel. 'O foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you?' And now they hated Paul for speaking the truth to them. So with many of you. This is not following fully.

Many in affliction begin to follow Christ: (Psalm 78: 34) When laid on a sick-bed, or when some bereavement occurs, they take to their Bible, begin to weep and pray. But the world comes back upon them – temptation, old companions – and they go back. They do not follow the Lord fully.

Ah! how many in this congregation are witnesses that ye have not followed the Lord fully. Ye did run well, who did hinder you? How many of you were impressed! Divine things appeared great and precious in your eyes. You came to the Lord's table, you sat down with solemnity. And where are you now? Have you not gone quickly out of the way?

Those of you who would follow Christ fully all your days, must be like Lot: not only flee from Sodom, but flee to Zoar. You must not rest in convictions, however deep. It is a good thing to be awakened, but, ah! you are not saved. If you would follow Christ fully, you must get fully into Christ.

You must continue in his word: 'Then said Jesus to those Jews that believed on him, If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed' (John 8:31). Remember, 'ye are saved by the gospel, if ye keep in memory

*You came to the
Lord's table, you sat
down with solemnity.
And where are you
now?*

what I preached unto you, unless ye have believed in vain.'

You must be like Mary: who sat at his feet and heard his word.

You must be like aged Simeon: 'Behold, there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon, the same was just and devout, waiting for the Consolation of Israel.' Perhaps he was converted when a young man: but it was no slight work – soon over; he followed the Lord fully all his days. And now, when he was an old man, he was still waiting for the Consolation of Israel. He followed the Lord fully, and now he follows the Lamb in paradise.

You must be like the palm tree: 'The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree; he shall grow like a cedar in Lebanon. Those that be planted in the house of the Lord shall flourish in the courts of our God. They shall still bring forth fruit in old age; they shall be fat and flourishing' (Psalm 92: 12-14). The palm tree and cedar have both this wonderful property, that they are fruitful to the last: and so it is with the living believer – he is a Christian to the last – full of the Spirit, full of love, full of holiness to the last. Like fine wine, the older the better. 'The path of the just is like the shining light, which shineth more and more unto the perfect day.'

You must be like Paul: From the day of his conversion, Paul was a new creature. The love of Christ constrained him, and he lived no more unto himself, but unto him that died for him and rose again. We never hear of his slackening his pace, or giving over fighting. 'Forgetting the things that are behind, and reaching forth unto the things that are before, I press toward the mark'. Even when an old man, he did not lose the fire of his love, or zeal, or compassion: 'I am ready to be offered, and the hour of my departure is at hand: I have fought the good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith.' He followed the Lord fully: he never looked back, he never halted, he never slumbered. He was a second Caleb.

So must you be, if you would be saved. 'He that endureth to the end shall be saved.' Not he that has a good beginning, but he that follows fully.

To follow Christ with all the heart

This was the way in which Caleb followed the Lord — with all his heart, fully. He had no inconsistencies, he followed the Lord in all he did.

The most of Christians do not follow the Lord fully — the most have some inconsistency. Most do not reflect Christ's image in every part. The most do not think it attainable, they are discouraged from seeking it. Many do not think it desirable; at least they think it better for the time to have this and that weakness.

Some do not follow Christ in his lowliness: Christ compared himself to the lily of the valleys: 'I am the rose of Sharon, and the lily of the valleys.' This was to express his lowliness — his genuine humility. Although he had no sin of his own to make him humble, yet he was humble in his own nature. He did not vaunt himself, did not seek the flattery of men. Some do not follow Christ in this. Some who seem really saved persons, yet have this unlikeness to Christ. They are proud: proud of being saved, proud of grace, proud of being different from others.

Some do not follow Christ in his self-denial: He was rich, yet for our sakes became poor, that we through his poverty might be rich. While we were sinners, Christ died for us. He had not where to lay his head. Yet many who seem to be Christians seek their own comfort and ease before everything else. They do not drink unto Christ's Spirit in this.

Some do not follow Christ in his love: Christ was love. He descended out of love, lay in the manger out of love, lived a life of sinless obedience out of love, died out of love. Yet some who are Christians do not follow him in this — do not love as he loved. Some have little compassion upon sinners, can sit at ease in their own houses, and see a world perish for lack of knowledge. How few will do anything out of love!

Many Christians have a time of decay.

So it was with Ephesus: At one time they were 'blessed with all spiritual blessings;' 'chosen to be holy and with-

Some who seem really saved persons, yet have this unlikeness to Christ. They are proud: proud of being saved, proud of grace, proud of being different from others

out blame before him in love.' They were followers of God, as dear children, and walked in love, as Christ loved them. But a time of decay followed, and Christ says: 'I have this against thee, that thou hast left thy first love.' They were not like Caleb — they did not follow the Lord fully.

So it was with David: When he fell into gross and open sin his whole soul seemed to decay for a time, all his bones seemed to be broken, and he feared that God would take away the Spirit from him for ever. He did not follow the Lord fully.

So it was with Solomon: When Solomon began to reign it seemed as if he would follow the Lord fully. The Lord appeared to him in Gibeon, saying: 'Ask what I shall give thee.' 'God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding, exceeding much; and largeness of heart, even as the sand that is on the sea-shore.' And God enabled him to build the temple, and blessed him in all things. Yet did Solomon suffer a sad decay: he 'loved many strange women... For it came to pass, when Solomon was old, that his wives turned away his heart after other gods: and his heart was not perfect with the Lord his God, as was the heart of David his father' (1 Kings 11: 1-4). He did not follow the Lord fully.

So it was with Asa: 'Asa did that which was good and right in the sight of the Lord his God' (2 Chron. 14: 2). By his faith he overcame the Ethiopian army of a thousand thousand. He also made a covenant, and all Judah rejoiced at the oath. Yet he suffered a sad decay. For, when the king of Israel came against him, his faith failed him. And when he was old, he was diseased in his feet; nevertheless he sought not to the Lord, but to the physicians. He did not follow the Lord fully.

So it was with the five virgins: They were wise, and took oil with them in their vessels with their lamps; yet while the bridegroom tarried they all slumbered and slept. They suffered a sad decay. They did not follow the Lord fully.

Ah! this must not be the way with you, if you would be like Caleb, and

follow the Lord fully. You must follow him without any inconsistency, and without any decay.

You must be like those that say, 'I am the Lord's': 'One shall say, I am the Lord's.' God says: 'My son, give me thine heart.' Ye are bought with a price — ye are not your own. If you would be a Caleb, you must give yourself away to him. You must give away your understanding, will and affections; your body and all its members, your eyes and tongue, your hands and feet. So that you are in no respect your own, but his alone. Oh, it is sweet to give up yourself to God, to be filled with his Spirit, to be ruled by his Word; a little vessel full of him, a vessel to bear his name, a vessel afore prepared unto glory! This is to follow the Lord fully.

You must be changed into the same image: 'But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord' (2 Cor. 3: 18). Our foolish hearts think it better to retain some part of Satan's image, but, ah! this is our happiness, to reflect every feature of Jesus, and that for ever. To have no inconsistency, to be like him in every part; to love like him, to weep like him, to pray like him, to be changed into his likeness: 'I shall be satisfied when I awake with thy likeness.'

You must have his whole law written in your hearts: 'I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts.' This is your chief happiness, to let every commandment have its proper place in your heart, to have it graven deep there, so that it cannot be effaced. This is to follow the Lord fully.

3. To follow Christ at all hazards

So it was with Caleb. The congregation 'bade stone him with stones': still he did not care, he would do his duty, whatever evil should befall him. He followed the Lord fully. Ah! there are many that follow Christ in the sunshine, that will not follow him in the storm. When the winter comes, the

This is your chief happiness, to let every commandment have its proper place in your heart, to have it graven deep there, so that it cannot be effaced. This is to follow the Lord fully

swallows fly away. There are many like the swallows. Many do not follow fully.

Reproach makes many stagger: As long as it is fashionable to be religious, and a man's character is advanced by it, rather than otherwise, then many follow Christ; but when it becomes a proverb and a byword, many are offended. Butterflies come out when the sun is warm; but a shower of rain makes them hide.

When men lose their worldly ease: When Paul and Barnabas were going to Asia, they took John Mark along with them; but when the work appeared dangerous, he went back (Acts 15: 38). If we would follow the Lord fully, we must go through good and bad report.

We must bear his reproach: 'Let us go out to him without the camp, bearing his reproach.' We must bear the reproach even of our nearest friends: 'He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.' We would fain go to heaven without reproach, but it cannot be, if we go the narrow way, and follow Christ fully.

We must not think of ease if we follow Christ fully: Christ trod a thorny path: he was crowned with thorns; we must not think to be crowned with roses. Paul says: 'For whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ.'

We must be willing to lose our life: Neither count I my life 'dear unto myself;' 'The time cometh, when whoso killeth you shall think that he doeth God service;' 'Whoso findeth his life shall lose it;' 'Be faithful unto death;' 'They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and they loved not their lives unto the death.'

Oh! it is sweet to follow Christ fully, for then we shall reign with him: 'If we suffer with him, we shall reign with him. If we deny him, he will deny us.'

2. How we may be enabled to follow the Lord fully

By keeping the eye upon him: This was what enabled Caleb to follow the Lord fully. He endured as seeing him who was invisible; he set the Lord always before him. If Caleb had been seeking a name, or his own wealth, fame, or honour, he would not have followed fully; he could not have followed all his days, nor with all his heart, nor at all hazards. If you would follow Christ fully, you must know him fully.

A sight of his beauty draws us to follow him. 'He is the chief among ten thousand, and altogether lovely.' 'And I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men unto me.' There is an indescribable loveliness in Christ that draws the soul to follow him. All divine perfections dwell in him; and yet he offers to save us.

His suitableness draws us to follow him: He just answers the need of our soul. We are all guilty, he is all righteousness; we all weakness, he all strength. Nothing can more completely answer our soul than Christ doth. The chickens run under the feathers of their mother when they see them stretched out, the dove flutters into the clefts. Noah into the ark; and our soul thus follows Jesus.

His freeness draws us to follow him: 'He will in no wise cast out.' He forgives seventy times seven. It is the keeping the eye on Christ that makes you follow him. It is seeing the King in his beauty that makes the soul cleave to him, and run after him. 'My soul followeth hard after thee.' 'Run the race set before you, looking unto Jesus.'

By having the Holy Spirit: Caleb 'had another spirit'. The other spies were carnal men; but Caleb had another spirit. He had the Holy Spirit dwelling in him, leading him, upholding and renewing. So with all who follow the Lord fully. The Spirit of God in the soul is a constant stream, a well of water springing up unto ever-

lasting life. Lot's wife looked back; but she had not the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. He is a filling Spirit who loves to fill the heart, to fill every chamber. 'Be filled with the Spirit.' 'Now the God of hope fill you.' He loves to write the whole law on the heart, to lift the whole soul to God.

3. The motives to follow the Lord fully

'Him will I bring into the land.' The other spies died of the plague, the people fell in the wilderness; but Caleb and Joshua, because they followed the Lord fully, were received into the land.

It is the only happy life: There is no happier life under the sun than to follow Christ all our days. There is not a more miserable creature on earth than a backslider. Every time we turn aside from following Christ, we are providing misery for ourselves – hidings, desertions, and broken bones. The only happy life is to follow with all our heart. We generally think it is happy to have this or that idol, but we are quite mistaken. Your true happiness is in self-surrender, in giving up your heart and all to him. Any one inconsistency mars your joy, mars communion. Are you not far happier in your times of closest walking with God? O that it were so with me always! Decays bring darkness and misery. The only happiness is to suffer the loss of all things. Many Christians are not willing to deny themselves, to suffer for Christ's sake, not willing to bear reproach or persecution. Christ will give a hundred-fold more – peace of conscience.

This is the way to be useful: It is the thriving Christian that is the useful Christian – the one that follows Christ fully. The blessing to Abraham was: 'I will bless thee, and make thee a blessing.' This was eminently true of Paul. He followed Christ fully; and what a blessing he was! So would you be, if you followed Christ fully. If you bore all the features of Christ about with you, what a blessing would you be to this place, and to the world! Not a cumberer of the ground. How useful to your children and neighbours!

This is the way to die happily: If you would die the death of Christ's people, you must live their life. Inconsistent Christians generally have a painful death-bed; but those that follow Christ fully can die like aged Paul, 'I am ready to be offered'; like Job – 'I know that my Redeemer liveth.'

This will insure a great reward: Every man shall be rewarded according as his work has been. Some will be made rulers over five, some over ten cities. I have no doubt that every sin, inconsistency, backsliding and decay of God's children takes away something from their eternal glory. It is a loss for all eternity; and the more fully and unreservedly we follow the Lord Jesus now, the more abundant will our entrance be into his everlasting kingdom. The closer we walk with Christ now, the closer will we walk with him to all eternity. 'Thou hast a few names in Sardis which have not defiled their garments. They shall walk with me in white, for they are worthy.' Amen. Dundee, 1842

Excerpt taken from RM McCheyne, *From the Preacher's Heart*, Publ. Christian Focus Publications, Tain, 1993. ISBN 1 85792 025 2

The Minister as

Bob Fyall, Rutherford House

A number of years ago one of the large police authorities received many complaints about the failure of their officers to relate to the public in a constructive and friendly manner. The top brass took these complaints seriously and overhauled their training programmes. This seemed to work, and there were many favourable comments on the greater friendliness and social graces of the officers. However, it was not long before a new complaint began to emerge and that was that the newly-trained officers did not know the law. That is an almost exact parallel to the situation we face as ministers of the gospel. It is easy to create bogus dichotomies between 'theology' which is seen as arid, boring and irrelevant and 'ministry' which is seen as engaging, caring and meeting people where they are.

The burden of this article is that such a dichotomy is false and true to neither ministry nor theology. We cannot minister without theology; if we do not have good theology, we will not have no theology but bad theology. We will become better ministers by becoming better theologians. If we do not think theologically, we will think in some other way, depending on tem-

perament and circumstances. This may be sentimentally, always reacting to felt needs and the clamour of the urgent. This may be rationalistically, driven often by secular models drawn from the world of business and encapsulated in the ghastly phrase – 'running the church'. Or it may be unimaginatively pragmatic, dealing with tasks as they arise, without overall coherence and vision.

To the truly theological, we need to be Biblical and to allow Scripture to shape and govern our thinking. The place we shall focus on is Isaiah 40; this great chapter is a Mount Everest in the Bible and unfolds in vivid and memorable pictures the great Biblical themes of creation, providence, history, worship and the word of God.

Imagine the prophet standing on the shore somewhere near modern Tel Aviv and looking out at what the Hebrews called 'the Great Sea'. When the contemporary world fears attack from the outside it tends to envisage this as coming from space as many recent films testify. To the Jews it was the sea which was the haunt of evil and terror and the powers of darkness. As the prophets look out over the dark waters one is so overwhelmed by the greatness

of God that the ocean tide simply becomes a small puddle in the Lord's hand – 'who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand?' Isaiah then looks at the land as it slopes upwards to the plateau of Lebanon. He sees that plateau as an altar, and imagines the vast forests cut down for wood and their teeming wildlife sacrificed and realises that it would be an offering far too small – 'Lebanon is not sufficient for altar fires, nor its animals enough for burnt offerings'. The great empires are like grass and flowers which wither and fade. This great chapter offers us four principles which will help us to thirst through what it means for the minister to be a theologian.

Sense of the Glory and Mystery of God

All true theology is born in a sense of awe and wonder. I used to say to the students in Durham University training for the ministry that one of the most important words in theology was 'Wow!'. To look out at the vast size and beauty of the universe, to reflect

Theologian

on the long ages of history, and to realise that our God is both above and beyond it all, and yet did not spare his own Son leads to a sense of awe and amazement. But what does this mean in terms of our ministry?

It will mean firstly living in, engaging with, and preaching big truths and ideas. There is sometimes a depressing minimalism about our preaching which focusses on what is the irreducible minimum that a person needs to know to become a Christian. The aim is merely to 'explain' the passage, and every sermon is reduced to 'Two ways to live'. This leads to a devaluing of Scripture as merely a quarry from which to extract texts whose relevance is perceived to be immediately obvious. I remember a number of years ago attending a service in a large and prestigious church in a famous university city. Everything seemed calculated to give maximum support and inspiration to the preacher: the place was packed, including large numbers of students, the singing was inspirational, and there was an atmosphere of expectancy. I looked forward to the sermon which was part of a series on Hebrews. You can well imagine the dismay when I heard the preacher as-

sert that to teach the Bible all you needed to do was to keep a page ahead. That sermon did not begin to wrestle with or show the wonder of the great truths in one of the most powerful books in the New Testament.

There needs to be an imaginative engagement with the Bible. Ninety per cent of effective preaching is learning how to read the Bible. That does not mean that our sermons will be exegetical lectures. Rather that our preaching will reflect the richness of story, poetry, letter, the great doctrines and that mind, heart and will are all involved in our study of Scripture. We will recognise that we do not know everything, that while there is a coherent story, there are also loose ends. We tend often in evangelical circles to wish the whole Bible had been written by Paul, or better still, by Calvin, and then there would have been no loose ends at all.

A chapter like Isaiah 40 unfolds great and life-changing truths. The Lord is sole Creator and that gives a unitary and holistic nature to our thinking and ministering. There are lessons to learn and truths to communicate: 'Do you not know? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you

from the beginning?' (v.21). The sense that this universe in all its vastness and complexity has a controlling mind and overall purpose is not simply an intellectual idea, it is a life-changing truth which helps to make sense of our own fragmented experience. Such truths need to be at the heart of our preaching. Let us not patronise people by imagining that such great truths are too complex for them. Our task is to help people to think through and engage imaginatively with huge issues. Once, when I was training for the ministry, I was at a seminar where all the emphasis was on what is now called 'dumbing down'. Everything, we were told, must be intelligible to 'little Mrs McWraggle' who sits in the back seat. In one sense that is true, but the whole way it was expressed was deplorably patronising. Even the rather disparaging use of 'little' and the ridiculous caricature of a name shows a condescending tone. How we are to help this 'little' woman to grow in grace, meet the demands of life and become mature in faith unless we present great truths? If we ourselves are not growing theologically, the faith of our congregations will remain at a Sunday School

level and the church will be in a perpetual toddler state.

A theology dominated by a sense of the glory and majesty of God will be conducted in an atmosphere of praise and worship. Scripture frequently bursts into praise: here in Isaiah 40, the Psalms, Exodus 15, Habakkuk 3, Romans 8, Philippians 2, Revelation 4 and 5 are only some striking examples. Here in Isaiah vivid and memorable truths are expressed in language of great power and beauty. Isaiah here gives us a clue as to how this kind of theology arises.

Here we have a true marriage of Word and Spirit in vv. 6-8. The 'grass' and 'flowers' – the great world powers – have their day and pass, as the Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life works throughout history. Yet that same Spirit speaks the eternal Word which is the revelation of this awesome God. We need to think theologically on these matters. There is another bogus dichotomy which is still all too common. It is alleged that some churches are totally word-centred and become arid and intellectual. There are other churches which are Spirit-centred and which are lively but often superficial. That such churches, of both kinds, do exist cannot be denied. However, do we seriously believe that the Spirit of God produces empty frivolity?

That view is absurd and little short of blasphemous. A theology for the greatness of God who speaks uniquely in His Son who is faithfully portrayed in the written Word given and illuminated by the Spirit is at the heart of all effective ministry.

A Sense of History

Thinking theologically, will help us to avoid what CS Lewis called 'chronological snobbery', i.e. the belief that one age, whether past or present is an objective platform from which we can assess and critique all other ages. Isaiah presents God not only as sole Creator but as Lord of history. 'The nations', (v.15) refers to humanity throughout history in its collective and organised

strength. The prophet here is not so much concerned to belittle humanity as to put history into a large frame 'before him' (v.17).

Thinking historically will give to our ministries a sense of perspective. There is tremendous value in Church History as well as the history of theology to show us our reliance on the labours of others. Verse 24 is a salutary reminder of our own transitoriness: 'No sooner are they planted, no sooner are they sown, no sooner do they take root in the ground, than he blows on them and they wither, and the whirlwind sweeps them away like chaff'. We

There is tremendous value in Church History as well as the history of theology to show us our reliance on the labours of others

need to draw on the wisdom of the ages, and see our work not as a defining moment but as part of the overall strategy and purposes of God.

History never simply repeats itself but recurring patterns can be discerned and thus past errors more easily avoided and lessons gained from past successes. We will learn, for example, the dangers of Evangelicalism degenerating into rationalism. Look at the number of once flourishing churches in USA and Europe: churches where once faithful and living fellowships flourished and where the gospel was powerfully preached. Many of these became unitarian. Why? The answer is that many of them became rationalistic and ceased to emphasize, then to preach, then to believe in anything that could not be logically explained. So out of its window went the Trinity, the Fall, the Incarnation, salvation by grace through faith, the Resurrection, the Holy Spirit, the Second Coming and much else. We must think long-term, not only in respect to our own ministry, but about the future direction of the work of God, learning from the past, but not straightjacketed by it.

Isaiah is speaking to encourage those who will return from Exile and he is thus concerned to put that period which he calls 'hard service' (v.1) into perspective. He does this by outlining the great contexts of creation and history in which the life of faith is lived and showing how these give depth to our picture of God.

A Genuine Spirituality

We need a truly Biblical spirituality which will engage heart as well as mind and will shape our ministry.

We need to take on the liberal establishment and not cower like frightened rabbits in the headlights of a car

'Spirituality' is a slippery term, and it has become very fashionable in the contemporary world. The interest in spirituality is in itself to be welcomed but we have to be careful that it has a truly theological basis, otherwise all kinds of syncretism and pluralism is smuggled in, and the deciding factor is what makes us feel good. Once again, Isaiah 40 gives us some guidelines about a genuine Biblical spirituality.

A truly Biblical spirituality must be rooted in an understanding of God's 'mighty acts'. We have already seen how these centre on the God of Creation and Salvation, or to put it another way, the Lord of the universe and of history. This will mean a real effort to grasp the Bible's storyline from Creation to new Creation and seeing the big picture. An imaginative engagement with this will save us from simply endlessly recycling our pet ideas on a few passages of Scripture. The imaginative engagement is vital; our thinking, feeling and being must become truly Biblical. If this does not happen, then one of two things will follow. First we will continue to say these things, but with less and less conviction. Since they do not grip our

hearts, they will not grip anyone else. Alternatively we will move further and further from a Biblical faith and end up far from our evangelical roots.

Spirituality which is truly Biblical and theological will show a capacity for increased learning and a clear structure of thought. It will be faithful to the emphases of the Bible and it will allow other books, convictions and other spiritual resources to be judged by Scripture. A good Biblical model is the Emmaus Road story (Luke 13: 35). There, as Scripture is opened, three things happen. Hearts are burning; a truly warm and vibrant faith has been kindled. Eyes are opened; they have been led more deeply into the knowledge of Christ and now he is the key to Scripture. There is a message to tell; the Christ who died is risen again and this theology and spirituality is to be shared with the world.

A Truly Biblical Pastoral Sensitivity

A theologically inspired ministry with a sense of the majesty of God, a sense of history and a genuine Biblical spirituality means we shall be Biblical in our approach to pastoral care. Here again, Isaiah 40 provides a salutary corrective to the idea sometimes expressed as 'I'm not into all this high-flown theology, I'm just a parish minister.' What would we think of a doctor who said 'I'm not into all this high-flown medicine, but I've a nice bedside manner'. Perhaps nowhere more than in this area do we need to think theologically. Here so often we are driven by unrealistic expectation and especially a desire to be seen to be hard at work meeting expectations which have nothing to do with the gospel. I was at a meeting where a minister was praised for being so busy that she was never in when you phoned? When did she pray, study her Bible, or for that matter, relax? Another minister said he liked to start work about 8.30am so he went up the street, dropping into the shops and post-office seeing this chatting to people as his pastoral work. Not, of course anything heavy, just passing the time of

day. This is all a world away from Isaiah 40 where the care of God is linked to his great power in creation and history. It is because he is 'the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth' that he is able to protect us, carry us and give us strength. He is not too great to care, he is too great to fail. We need to see pastoral care as an outflow of the kind of theology I have outlined.

We will have a realistic view of humanity. This chapter has already demonstrated the frailty and insignificance of 'the nations' compared to the transcendence of God. We need to be bolder in our public defence of the faith and we will do this better if we think theologically. More of us should be writing for *Life and Work*, *Ministers' Forum* and other journals. We need to do this with graciousness but with theological depth and conviction. We need to take on the liberal establishment and not cower like frightened rabbits in the headlights of a car. We

our theology of God or it will simply end up as pragmatism.

We will also have a realistic view of ourselves. Verses 28-31 remind us of the tiredness and burnout which is so much a feature of our lives. In the course of over thirteen years spent training students for the ministry, I have met hardly any lazy ministers. Most are workaholics. Isaiah reminds us that we do our work in the strength of the Creator. We need to remember this and act on it. It would be better if we stopped using the phrase 'my people'. We are not the messiah; there is not a vacancy. He is the one who gives us the strength to minister. Verse 30 seems an anti-climax; we start with soaring like eagles and end with a kind of weariness. But it is anything but. Soaring like eagles refers to those golden moments when nothing seems too much effort. Running is the business of pressurised living; walking is the grey days of the routine grind. In all these days we live and we minister in the Lord's strength.

A truly theological understanding of ministry will give us a sober assessment of our own frailty and vulnerability. It will free us from the kind of pseudo-spirituality which tries to be holier than God. Paul in Romans 12 urges us to present our bodies as living sacrifices, not half-dead ones.

The true pastor, according to John 10, not only feeds the sheep but fights the wolf

need to give a lead to the seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal. That is a vital part of the pastoral task.

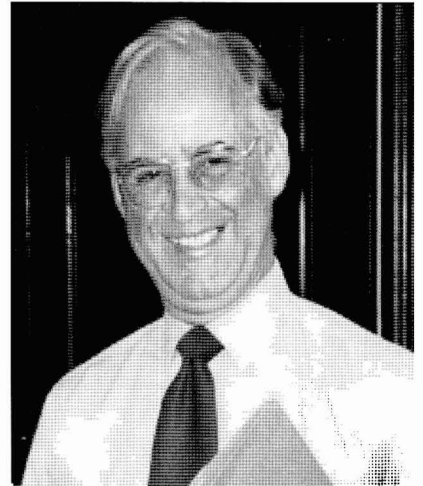
We need to think theologically on the term 'pastor'. The true pastor, according to John 10, not only feeds the sheep but fights the wolf. Too often pastoral care is seen as non-directive counselling and meeting the needs that clamour most loudly for attention. Isaiah 40 again points us in the right direction: 'He tends the flock like a shepherd, he carries the lambs in his arms' (v.11). God cares for his people; so must we. For the lambs, the weak, the confused, the lonely, the lost, there must be tenderness. For the bully, the gossip, the trouble-maker there must be firmness and refusal to be brow-beaten. Pastoral care needs to draw on

Three final observations

First keep on learning. We ought to be developing our theological expertise.

Secondly we need to keep on growing in a mature engagement with Scripture.

Thirdly, undergirding everything we must be people of prayer, people who know God.



Bob Fyall meets Ann Allen

For the last ten years one of the most appreciated features of the *Rutherford Journal of Church and Ministry* has been ‘Ann Allen Meets...’. Ann has interviewed a range of people prominent in Scotland and beyond. It is time for this remarkable woman to be interviewed herself.

Bob: How did you come to faith and what were the earliest influences on your Christian development?

Ann: Born in Aberdeenshire, a ‘Rhynie Quoinie!’ younger of two daughters so I always think of Donside as ‘Home’. Father described by his minister at his funeral as ‘a pillar or stoup’ of the Kirk. He was a tireless treasurer and session clerk in the congregations he worshipped in and my mother always gave hospitality to visiting preachers. The minister was a friend, often in our home and so the

church played a significant part in our lives, and church-going was a natural weekly routine. Ours was a household where lively discussion was encouraged and strong views were held!

It was in my teens that I came to faith. My older sister had become a Christian through the Billy Graham campaign and she prayed for me for about five years. I gave her a hard time initially but it was through her that I attended an evangelistic rally at Carrubbers Close and first responded to the Gospel. I clearly remember the sense of excitement and expectation with which I read the Bible and Jesus being so real and alive for me. I then went along to the school SU group and to a summer SU camp which was a first fantastic experience of peer fellowship, teaching and great fun as well.

Bob: Were you involved in activities and organisations at university which anticipated the future direction of your life?

Ann: University days were spent in Edinburgh where I achieved an Honours degree in English Language and Literature. Along with hordes of other students and young people I went Sunday by Sunday to Holyrood Abbey church and drank in the wonderful bible teaching from Jim Philip. I owe a huge debt to his ministry. The Christian Union was strong and vibrant and I immersed myself in its activities and there formed lasting friendships and learned to pray with and for people. We held an outreach in our halls of residence and saw the Lord move in remarkable ways in people’s lives. A leaders’ camp at Keswick led by the redoubtable Meg Foote, IVF campaigns in the summer recess and CSSM work were wonderful learning and training times. At a CSSM mission at Elie I met a certain Martin Allen and we married the day after I graduated.

When we married we anticipated lives of service as lay people. Martin was in education and training in in-

dustry, I was teaching English. Martin became an elder and Sunday School leader at Holyrood, I started an SU group in my school and we had the opportunity of using our home and sharing with all sorts of folk. Martin's call to ministry meant existence on a grant for three years and then a wonderful post-grad scholarship year at Covenant Seminary, St Louis. Studying and worshipping in a different culture for a year helped us sift the cultural from the essential and equipped us for the new challenge of parish work.

Bob: For nearly thirty years now you have been at the heart of remarkable work at Chryston – what particularly for you have been the blessings and trials of these years and do they have lessons for others?

Ann: The biggest trial for me in becoming 'the Manse family' was the loss of privacy. Being 'a public figure' was an entirely new and unwelcome experience. Nothing prepared me for hearing the criticisms which the preaching of the gospel brought. In our first difficult years I had to learn how to 'love enemies' and cope with a real measure of isolation. Mercifully the sense we had of God being at work outweighed the difficulties. We saw folks converted and there is nothing so energising as seeing deep spiritual change. Ministry makes huge emotional demands and I can't imagine how couples in ministry cope if both are not wholly committed to loving the people the Lord has called them to. If you are sure you are where the Lord wants you to serve then, we learned, you dig deep, find new resources, and commit to the long haul, until the Lord says otherwise.

Bob: You have for years juggled many responsibilities as wife, mother and now grandmother. Do you have advice for others in similar circumstances?

Ann: All women are gifted at keeping lots of balls in the air. We all have

multi-faceted careers! I made a conscious decision to be a full-time Mum and wife in the parish. Others make different choices as God leads them. Later on I could not have taken up any of the tasks I did had I been in full-time employment. I loved teaching and now do a little supply work but I have no regrets because of all I have been involved in and the variety of avenues I've been allowed to explore. Currently I have my grandchildren each week for one day and I treasure that time with them. It's a terrific but exhausting privilege to share their infancy.

I think the only advice I would give to any minister's wife is to be a loving and constructive critic of her husband's ministry and to be real. To play a role is no good. We have to have that ultimate integrity of life and be truly ourselves in our congregations and wear no masks. In that way we make real relationships and God can use us as we allow him to.

Bob: You are probably one of the best-known laywomen in the Church of Scotland – would you tell us something of your work and comment on the significance you place on it.

Ann: Being involved in the Church at a national level was never in my life plan! God sovereignly and surprisingly arranged that. I had written a very brief letter of enquiry to the Womens' Guild concerning the introduction of 'Mother God' and as a result was asked to serve on the committee looking into the 'Motherhood of God' issue. It was a pretty brutal experience. I was totally naïve, had no knowledge of how these committees worked, and was pretty isolated in the position I was taking. I hated every minute of it and used to fall out of the train after meetings and burst into tears to Martin's dismay! It was a huge learning curve in church politics. Some media exposure followed which led to an invitation to join the Board of Social Responsibility. Committees in my view are only worthwhile if they have an end product and affect real life. Social

Responsibility does that in a remarkable way. I learned from the ground up about human need, social work, professional standards and accountability and how to think through ethical issues. It was an enormous privilege for me, and the dual involvement with the Guild nationally brought me into contact with so many committed church women. Convening the Board had never been on the agenda. As a non-ordained lay person I had never anticipated being approached and was terrified actually at the prospect. In reality it proved to be an exhilarating, rewarding roller coaster of an experience which made huge demands. Vital issues cropped up in these four years and involved me in presenting the Board's view in the media, the General Assembly, the Scottish Executive and even the Moses' Room in the House of Lords. I held I think to two objectives throughout. To be true to what I understand of the Lord and his teaching and to present the position of the Board with integrity. It was a period of great pressure but enormous privilege.

Bob: You are also known on the wider scene, particularly Scripture Union – could you tell us a bit about that and how you see the role of para-church bodies?

Ann: Since relinquishing that role on the Board, I have become involved with International Christian College and Scripture Union. Scripture Union has always been close to my heart, instrumental in our lives, the development of our own children and influential in the lives of adults and young people in our congregation. Scripture Union uniquely perhaps in Scotland stands alongside the church and feeds into it, co-operating with local congregations, presbyteries and youth workers through Associate worker schemes, regional posts, and schools workers and volunteers. It is amazing that we still have such an open door for the gospel and the Word in schools. Statistics inform us that most people come to Christ before they are 20 years old so I see Scripture Union

as having a vital and strategic role in evangelism today.

Bob: As a Christian woman to whom many would look as a role model, what are your views on women in the church? In particular how would you advise younger women about their gifts and their role?

Ann: I recognise that as a minister's wife I have had singular opportunities for service amongst people and I thank God for that. I am not personally persuaded from scripture that women have an authority role in the church but I am persuaded that women have ministry gifts and alongside men have to be encouraged to exercise these gifts for the glory of God. I think that the evangelical men in our denomination need to foster and encourage the gifts of women and to stop feeling threatened by them! I have had no formal theological training but I would expect that all women, who like me have spent most of their adult lives on the receiving end of biblical teaching and exposition, should be theologically aware and informed. Doctrinal and biblical understanding underpin who we are, how we live, how we parent, how we witness, what we think. I'd love to see more women in this and the next generation able to articulate a biblical response to the issues of the day in church and society. Women are hugely gifted in personal friendship evangelism and I long to see women deliberately honing their gifts and using them under God in their work, in their socialising and in specific Christian service.

Bob: Are there other areas you would like to be involved in in the future?

Ann: As to the future... Who knows? God is writing the script as he has done thus far and I rarely anticipate the twist in the plot! If any one had told me 25 years ago what lay ahead I would have shaken my head in disbelief or perhaps 'done a Jonah'.

Christian service has no retiral strategy so I guess I plan being available to the Lord to be used in whatever way He chooses. Living like that has proved really exciting in the past and no doubt will continue to be in the future.

Bob: How do you see the future of Evangelicalism in the Church of Scotland and more widely?

Ann: These are crisis days in our denomination. The church will survive, whether our denomination will is another question. This generation are in no way thirled to denomination. They will find a place of worship which suits them, so we are in a competitive if shrinking market place. Evangelicalism is embraced in some form or other by many. What we agree on is far more than the issues where we disagree. I would like to think that evangelicals within the Kirk could begin to work together for the greater good of the Kirk, supporting initiatives in Mission and outreach and embracing constructive change. We need to clearly identify where the Kirk's bureaucracy, which expands as the work shrinks, limits or hinders the gospel and then we need to become involved centrally. In congregations we need to present the gospel and teach the word in a relevant and arresting way while providing a body life which supports and loves people. We need to train and use our laity so that the fellowship of all believers becomes a working reality in our churches, and the clergy support, and are supported by, others. I have no answers, just hopes and dreams.

Bob: As Ann says, retiral is not something which is a feature of serving the Lord, although we may retire from specific tasks. We have not, I'm sure, heard the last of Ann's significant contributions to the cause of the gospel. We look forward to hearing what God will continue to do in and through her.

Book Reviews

CHRISTIAN BASICS BIBLE STUDIES

Hope - Never Beyond Hope

J.I. Packer

IVP, Illinois, 2003. 64pp. £2.50

ISBN 0-85111-355-9

Wisdom - Making Life Work

Bill Hybels

IVP, Illinois, 2003. 64pp. £2.50

ISBN 0-85111-357-5

Transformation - Developing a Heart for God

Rebecca Manley Pippert

IVP, Illinois, 2003. 64pp. £2.50

ISBN 0-85111-356-7

These three booklets form part of a larger series of Bible studies designed to be used by individuals or groups. The series title contains the word 'basic' but there is no reason why the studies couldn't be used by more mature Christians. The key, as with all authentic Bible study, is adapting the material to the local context and to the needs and concerns of those using it.

The format employed in each case is a simple one. Each edition begins with a short 'how to' section, in which advice is given as to how the material might best be used. This is followed by a brief introduction to the overall theme. Thereafter, readers are offered a set of six individual studies through which the theme is explored at greater depth. At the end there are helpful leader's notes and a useful section of study notes.

How good might these studies be for individuals or groups? That probably depends on how good the group facilitator is, or how creative the individual is. Used as they are, without imagination or adaptation to the context, these studies will struggle to come to life. On the other hand, an experienced and inventive leader will be able to use them productively, as a springboard to detailed and meaningful study.

Each study is made up of a series of three forms of questions. Firstly, there

are basic questions which ask the reader to observe the detail of the given passage. Secondly, there are a number of questions designed to lead the group to the meaning of the passage. The third set of questions is to do with application. Having seen what is said and considered its meaning, the essential task remaining is to ask: 'How does this affect my life?' Without this third step the study will always be somewhat abstract and removed from the lives of those engaging in it – nothing more than an academic exercise – and surely not the point of studying Scripture. A good group leader is essential if this part of the study is to be done effectively.

It should be noted that while all of these studies are thematic, some confine themselves to one particular portion of Scripture whilst others range widely throughout the canon. The benefit of the latter approach is that it makes clear the inter-relatedness of the various parts of the Bible.

Martin Fair, Arbroath

Reverberations of Faith: A Theological Handbook of Old Testament Themes

Walter Bruggemann

Westminster John Knox, Louisville/London, 2002. 256pp. £4.99

ISBN 0-664-22231-5

Never ignore a preface! In this case, the Preface gives us the context in which to understand and appreciate the intention of the author. Walter Bruggemann's aim is not to give isolated definitions of words and themes but 'to reflect the complexities, depth, and interrelatedness of these entries, wherein one must entertain them all in order to sense fully any one of them (xi)'. In all, one hundred and five themes are outlined (one hundred were intended but having miscounted and written, all were included for which we can be grateful) around a quarter of which are 'big ticket' items. Of the rest, there are some expected and some unexpected inclusions.

Bruggemann's procedure has been to state, more or less, a consensus scholarly position, identify the issues

within the theme and 'to indicate how the interpretive question may matter to serious church people (xii)'. To do this for over one hundred themes in 240 pages of text means that many of the articles are short. But that does not mean they are without worth. Readers of this journal will probably know already that Bruggemann's critical positions differ significantly from the evangelical mainstream. Yet no contemporary OT scholar has given greater theological and ethical insight to evangelicals than he, and so it is in this book, although with broader brush.

It would be impossible to cover all the themes, but let me give you a taste from one of the 'big ticket' items, 'Creation'. In referring to the creation/evolution debate he writes, 'Creation faith is not about origins, but it is about the ongoing dynamic of fidelity that characterises the world in its life with God. This faith must be understood as a theological response that is not to be distorted into scientific explanation. The so-called 'creation-evolution' debate is a powerful modern distraction from the harsh reality of creation faith that systemic human disobedience can damage and finally dismantle the world that YHWH generously willed (42)'. Many other insightful comments could be quoted, although a book like this is not without its disappointments.

Would I have bought this book had I not been given it to review? Given the format, probably not, but the loss would have been mine. It may, however, have been priced out of the market by the publishers.

Jared Hay, Balerno, Edinburgh

Paul for Everyone - 1 Corinthians

Tom Wright

SPCK, 2003, 256 pp. £9.99

ISBN 0 281 05305 7

According to the publishers, 'Tom Wright has undertaken a tremendous task: to provide guides to all the books of the New Testament'. Having read the volume on 1 Corinthians this reviewer intends to buy the complete set. The format is simple. Each section

begins with Wright's own translation of the passage. These are translations and not paraphrases, and manage to marry accuracy with a relaxed, modern idiom. Next comes the commentary. Wright's gift as a preacher is apparent as he always begins by bridging the gap between the 21st and the 1st centuries with an observation or illustration grounded in the modern world. Typically he then explains the social context of the passage before proceeding to unpack its theological significance. He concludes each section with a short, challenging application for the reader and the modern church.

Parallels with William Barclay's *Daily Study Bible* series are obvious. Here we have a scholar of international repute writing for a lay audience in a way that is attractive and accessible without being patronising. Wright's inclusion of a glossary of terms which would be unfamiliar to the average reader reveals his commitment to reach the non-professional with the best New Testament scholarship. Any differences between Wright and Barclay are to Wright's credit. He is far more evangelical in his theology. His comments on the difference between the sexes, the uniqueness of Christ, and sexuality are thoroughly orthodox.

Any criticisms are small. Sometimes he translates *Christos* as King but at other times Messiah. He always uses the lower case 'spirit' and in his glossary definition of the holy spirit his desire to be simple becomes over-simplistic to the point of confusion.

That aside, I suggest you remove your dog-eared copies of Barclay to make way for the more up-to-date (and more theologically sound) Wright.

Ian Watson, Kirkmuirhill

Now My Eyes Have Seen You - Images of creation and evil in the book of Job (NSBT series)

Robert S. Fyall

Apollos, IVP Leicester, 2002. 208pp. £10.99

ISBN 0 85111 498 9

This title is an excellent contribution to the series entitled 'New Studies in Biblical Theology', and is a thematic study of the book of Job, as opposed to being an exhaustive commentary upon that book. Nonetheless, one of the great merits of this study is the breadth of the material from Job that is covered.

The author focuses upon the imagery that is found in Job, emphasising that a real grasp of that imagery is essential in order to lay hold of the book's message. His concern is to demonstrate that the figures of Behemoth and Leviathan are not merely images drawn from the natural world, as is assumed in so many contemporary commentaries on Job, but rather that they represent death and Satan respectively. From the outset, the author contends for the unity of Job, and this he does in the most able and robust fashion, preparing the way for his interpretations of Behemoth and Leviathan, which only serve to underline his case. He demonstrates that the closing chapters harmonise in a wonderfully nuanced fashion with the earlier ones. The author's case is made with great clarity and his conclusions are compelling.

Robert Fyall steers an able course between the *Scylla* of making too simplistic a case, on what is quite clearly a deep and profound book of the Scriptures, and the *Charybdis* of writing a work that is so technical as to make it inaccessible to a wider readership. My only slight quibble, and it is slight, is that not all the Hebrew and Ugaritic references are translated, and if they were it might help the lay reader. This could not be described as a light read, but one that is undoubtedly worthwhile and beneficial. For any preacher who is considering preaching on Job, I reckon that this will soon become essential reading.

Steven Reid, Carlisle

Book Reviews

New International Bible Commentary: Genesis

John E. Hartley

Paternoster Press, Carlisle, 2000.

393pp. £11.95

ISBN 0 85364 722 4

'Life, the universe, and everything' is the title of one of the late Douglas Adams's *Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy* series. It is a title which could easily attach to the book of Genesis, dealing as it does with themes of Creation, Fall, grace, judgement, hope, human society and so on. Preachers will frequently return to Genesis in order to teach a Christian worldview to their people. So when a new commentary on the book appears on the scene, we must ask 'What has this commentary to offer that is new?' and 'Will this commentary provide added insight as I prepare my nth series in Genesis?'

The approach to the text of the NIBC commentaries is described as 'believing criticism', which neither ignores recent scholarly work nor devotes undue attention to defending the Bible against its detractors. It claims to marry 'probing reflective interpretation of the text to loyal biblical devotion and warm Christian affection.' (xii) This is not an inaccurate description of this book.

In his introduction Hartley makes interesting comments and offers appealing insights into the structure of the book. He describes the palistrophic arrangement of the Abraham and Jacob narratives. Sadly this is not well developed through the text, which leaves such observations on the level of the recondite. By contrast, those familiar with the Old Testament commentaries of Dale Ralph Davis will know how well he can identify structure in a passage in such a way as to illuminate brilliantly its meaning and the message intended by the author.

A fierce debate is currently being conducted in many conservative Bible Colleges and seminaries as to the validity of reading Christ into the Old

Book Reviews

Testament text, or of reading forward from the Old into the New Testament. This reviewer was interested to notice how cautiously Hartley expresses himself in this connection. For example on Genesis 3:15 he comments 'A few late Jewish writers and church fathers found in this verse a fuller meaning than would one day be realized in the Messiah...'. Many of us using this commentary might be less inhibited!

This commentary could usefully be added to the shelf, but it would not necessarily be among the first a busy preacher would turn to in preparation. However, as a result of reading the book this reviewer finds he does have a valuable resource of notes for the future.

Martin Thomson, Wigtown

Children in Revival: 300 Years of God's Work in Scotland

Harry Sprange

Christian Focus Publications, Fearn, 2002. 416pp.

ISBN 1 85792 096 1

Harry Sprange's *Kingdom Kids* (Fearn 1994) broke new ground when it was first published. Its focus on God's work amongst children during times of revival in Scotland unearthed information and pieced it together in a way that had not been done previously. This expanded and updated version is very welcome and will hopefully reach an expanded audience.

Harry Sprange has done us the great service of drawing together numerous reports of spiritual revival amongst children ranging across three centuries and virtually every part of Scotland. After the briefest of introductions he launches into account after account, many of them first-hand and most of them quoted verbatim, of children coming to faith. Many of these are dramatic stories in which large numbers of children gather (20,000 to hear Whitefield in Edinburgh) and come under deep conviction of sin.

In five uneven chapters we are taken from Whitefield's visit to Scotland in the 1740s through to the 20th century with the outburst of revival in the Hebrides. In between we are pointed to the remarkably fruitful Gaelic Schools Society of the early 19th century, the upsurge in spiritual interest during the 1859-63 period (by far the longest chapter) and the work of Moody during the late 1800s. The accounts, drawn from both the religious and secular press, all contribute to demonstrating Sprange's thesis: not only were many children converted throughout these periods but children played a vital role in the revivals.

There are many references to what we would call 'peer evangelism', where children coming to faith immediately see their responsibility to share it with others. There is also a major emphasis on something very close to Harry Sprange's heart, children gathering to pray. The chapter on the 1859-63 period is replete with examples, which show both the extent of the phenomena and their impact. Several examples are given of adults being drawn to faith through hearing children pray.

What more could we ask from the book? This book has the specific purpose of drawing together reports that have not been collated hitherto. However, there is a need for more analysis of the data. Are there principles we can draw from these accounts for our mission? What was the longer-term impact of these remarkable occurrences? Are there lessons for us in the demise of these times of special blessing?

In a country where, according to the 2002 Scottish Church Census, we have lost 21% of our under 15 year olds since 1994 we are in great need of such stimulus. From 1866 William Grant, with 300 children in his Sunday school, is quoted as saying: 'It is only by constant and careful attention to the young that our congregations are kept up and the church also' (p.121).

This book should be read and discussed widely. Above all, however, it should lead us to thanksgiving and prayer.

Andy Bathgate, Scripture Union, Scotland

Original Sin - Illuminating the Riddle (New Studies in Biblical Theology No. 5)

Henri Blocher

Apollos, Leicester, 1997. 160pp. £10.99
ISBN 0 85111 514 4

In this brief and tightly argued treatise Henri Blocher tackles the hoary problem of original sin, striking a new path between the two popular views that humans are condemned either because of Adam's sin or because of their own.

Chapter One defines and surveys the Scriptural data on original sin. Adopting Calvin's definition, 'that hereditary depravity and corruption of our nature diffused into all parts of the soul, which first makes us liable to God's wrath, then also brings forth in us those works which Scripture calls 'works of the flesh' (Gal. 5:19) [*Institutes II.i.8*].', Blocher identifies and offers Scriptural support for four critical elements: original sin (1) is universal (Isa. 59: 2; Ps. 14), (2) belongs to the nature of humanity (Ps. 51: 6), (3) is inherited (Isa. 43: 27; Hos. 12: 3), and (4) stems from Adam (Gen. 3; Rom. 5).

Chapter Two examines and refutes three challenges to the historicity of Adam and the Fall. Against evolutionary theories, Blocher argues that scientific evidence actually supports Genesis, since scientific evidence shows that *homo sapiens sapiens* emerged about 40,000 years ago in a neolithic culture similar to that described in Genesis 4. Against mythological theories, Blocher argues that there are significant differences between Genesis and ancient mythology and that 'a few mythical traits do not constitute a mythical story' (p. 49). Against symbolic theories that discard historicity while attempting to retain meaning, Blocher argues that the significance of the event evaporates if it did not actually happen.

Chapter Three examines Romans 5, rejecting prevailing interpretations and offering an alternative reading. He states

that 'the role of Adam and of his sin in Romans 5 is to make possible the imputation, the judicial treatment, of human sins' (p. 77). Basic to his argument is Paul's view that an act is not sinful until so defined by law. Adam's act was sinful because it transgressed a direct command of God. Why are the actions of individuals today regarded as sinful? If individuals born after Adam do not participate in a legal relationship with God, then their actions cannot be regarded as right or wrong. Adam as 'Head' of humanity provides us with a covenant relationship with God; therefore, our acts are regarded as sinful or righteous.

Chapter Four demonstrates how this interpretation illuminates the paradoxical riddles of humanity's (1) nobility and baseness, (2) responsibility and inheritance, (3) freedom and compulsion. The final chapter clarifies implications: We inherit a covenant relationship with God, which defines our acts as sinful or righteous. We also inherit a relationship with humanity; this places us in solidarity with the enemies of God. We are not born in a state of neutrality toward God, but neither are we born condemned by God; we are condemned when we choose to rebel.

This challenging work will be appreciated by pastors and church leaders ready to think deeply. Those willing to ponder its pages will find exegetical insights, apologetic ideas, and even evangelistic suggestions that more than repay the effort.

Robert Keay, St Andrews

Decoding Daniel – Reclaiming the visions of Daniel 7–11

Ernest Lucas

Grove Books Ltd, Cambridge, 2000. 23pp. £2.50

ISBN 1 85174 4525

In *Decoding Daniel* the writer, Ernest Lucas, sets out to concentrate on chapters 7–11 of the prophecy of Daniel, which present the reader with challenging problems of interpretation. It is the thesis of his book that the understanding of those chapters has often been confused by an approach he de-

scribes as 'decoding', which he distinguishes from the application of 'well-trying methods of interpretation'.

It is also his conviction that whereas chapters 7–11 have, on the surface, little to offer the preacher, it is possible through study to discern theological insights that provide valuable material for preaching. It is with this in mind that Lucas has provided suggestions for the preacher (or the Bible Study Group) at the close of each of his three chapters.

In chapter 1 the author deals with the cultural background of the imagery in Daniel chs 7 and 8. Perhaps the exigencies of a 23-page booklet make for difficulties at this point. Certainly there is a feeling that confusion is being increased rather than dissipated by his argument. To quote from Page 5, 'One might question the value of all this discussion and debate.' Of more assistance is Lucas' recognition of a tie-up between the imagery of Hosea 13: 7, 8 and that of Daniel ch. 7 with their reference to various beasts.

In chapter 2 the author considers the biblical roots of Daniel's 'seventy weeks of years'. He concludes these are best understood symbolically, thus rendering them amenable to 're-applications' in Maccabean times and even later. Lucas' thinking here and in his final chapter, where he looks at 'Patterns in History' in relation to Daniel chapter 11 seems to lose touch with Scripture, owing more to the 'Akkadian Prophecies' of Grayson and Lambert.

This is a Grove booklet, easily obtainable, but perhaps of limited value for congregational groups.

Clifford Rennie, Larbert

Why Bother With Church?

Simon Jones

IVP, Leicester, 2001. 215pp. £5.99

ISBN 0 85111 254 4

This book is updated, revised and expanded from Jones' 1998 book *Struggling To Belong*. He writes as someone who cares passionately about the church, but who will not settle for easy assumptions about the church. He asks searching questions about what

Book Reviews

church is and what church ought to be like. Things are not as they should be and simply putting down a carpet or introducing powerpoint is not going to be the cure. We have to look deeper, question cherished assumptions – such as measuring Christian commitment primarily by participation in church. This Jones does in a brave way that may well grate with fondly held views and assumptions. He is particularly concerned to rescue the position of the church in the eyes of those who have been put off by elements of church life that are not essential to the Gospel or indeed stifle or work against the gospel. Sadly, he reckons, church as it is, is often damaging – unwelcoming, arrogant and inconsistent and prone to compartmentalise are key weaknesses. Yet while he is in favour of new ways of being and doing church, he is not advocating that we simply come up with something that suits us. The church has to be firmly rooted in the word of God and in the purposes and calling of God.

Does the Church gather primarily for worship? Belonging before believing, mentoring, integrated spirituality, the Kingdom of God, serving the community rather than dictating the rules of engagement with others – these are just some of the key, relevant and very contemporary themes that he deals with. Commitment, critical belonging and creative participation are suggested areas to work at in our own contexts if our churches are to have a future. And these only because we are caught up in the work of the kingdom of God – so we must be outward looking, willing to reject the safe option, ready for risks and some failure. He concludes by identifying signs of hope and offering a checklist for a better future: listen to those who are struggling with church; allow others to play a part in setting the teaching agenda; involve people of all kinds in all the church does; decentralise church activities.

Book Reviews

This book is moving: personal illustrations bring home the reality of the issues and the fact that these are not ultimately about issues but about people, people in connection with God. There is little in the book that people cannot hear or get elsewhere and it does not offer an overall or well thought out or deep treatment of what is the church and her mission. But it does present a number of issues with honesty, directness and passion. And for that, Simon Jones has done a good job.

Gordon R. Palmer, *East Kilbride*

Making a World of Difference: Christian Reflections on Disability

Roy McCloughry and Wayne Morris
SPCK, London, 2002. 146pp. £8.99
ISBN 0 281 05423 1

This book addresses a range of contemporary issues about disability and society and disabled people and the church. McCloughry is a well-known writer on contemporary issues and Morris works for CHAD, a national church and disability organisation. Both authors have disabilities. The book includes a useful description of the history of attitudes to disability and contrasts the medical, social and inclusive ways in which society has understood disability. There are thorough expositions of some difficult Old Testament passages as well as pastoral reflections on the lives of Jacob and Mephibosheth. There is an exploration of Jesus' inclusive healing ministry and how he frequently crossed boundaries. There is a robust dismissal of the supposed connection between sin and disability and a thoughtful critique of some recent views expressed about Christ himself being disabled at Calvary and the symbolic importance to disabled people of Christ in resurrection retaining the marks of his suffering. The authors state the conservative and radical positions of the debate and then highlight the need for partnership and not for disabled people to cherish an exclusive perspective

about Christ that defines their experience. The authors include a chapter on 'Healing and wholeness seeing merit in the Christian attitude of the 'now' and the 'not yet', and take a balanced view of this sensitive topic with a useful three-point summary. The penultimate chapter heading summarises the tone of the book 'From deficit to diversity'.

Whilst providing a clear and concise survey of Biblical material on disability the writers are keen to apply their analysis to the contemporary church. The book is highly relevant to current moves towards greater social inclusion and to the October 2004 implementation of further sections of the Disability Discrimination Act. The book has details of a 10-step plan for churches, a brief section on use of language and an appendix of useful organisations. Overall, the book gives a thorough and concise Biblical insight into our approach to people with disability before making a balanced response to recent radical perspectives, and then gives practical guidance about what we should be doing in our churches.

Paul Merchant, *Musselburgh*

Editor's Note: We apologise to Paul Merchant for omitting his name as having reviewed *Ambassadors to the World* by Chris Wright in RJCM 10.2

Heirs Of Salvation – Studies in Biblical Assurance

D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones
Bryntirion Press, Bryntirion, 2000,
100pp. £4.50
ISBN 1 85049 1747

For those who have become accustomed to the penetrating analysis, sound conservative exposition and challenging personal application of Martyn Lloyd-Jones, this slim volume of five sermons will not disappoint. The theme of biblical assurance is firmly grounded in Hebrews 11, but Lloyd-Jones ranges throughout the whole Bible to flesh out his studies of the characters whose life and witness he explores.

It is evident that these were originally sermons. Much of the oral structure and many rhetorical devices

are still clear in the text. There is repetition in profusion and short pithy sentences. There is, however, a curious unevenness in the sermons. All are biblically sound and pastorally pointed, but two stand out above the rest. The two sermons on Abraham soar. Here is Lloyd-Jones at his best. Here, to quote himself, is theology on fire. In contrast other sermons are thin, particularly the sermon on Enoch. Now, in a sense that is understandable, for there isn't a great deal about Enoch in the Bible; but what little there is assiduously mined by Lloyd-Jones. It is worthy and wordy. Though it engages our mind, it never really ignites our passion.

Overall, the theme of assurance is carefully exegeted from both Old and New Testaments. Lloyd-Jones takes care to ground assurance in the Word of God, but he also highlights the inner witness of personal experience of God. Ultimately, Lloyd-Jones argues, assurance is not about *what* you know; assurance is about *Who* you know.

Here is careful, cogent argument from a man who knows God personally, just as his examples did. This is a little book which is well worth reading.

Alan Macgregor, *Banff*

Affirming the Evangelist: Responses to Good News People

David Jeans, Daniel Cozens, Ian Maher.

Grove Evangelism Series No. 50,
Grove Books Ltd: Cambridge, 2000.
24pp. £2.25.
ISBN 1 85174 431 2

This short booklet is written by three men involved in evangelism and the training of evangelists as a response to the Church of England's House of Bishops' report *Good News People*. The report describes what is happening at diocesan level and although it would have been helpful to have read the report in conjunction with the response one can still benefit from the booklet on its own.

Having a vested interest in heightening the profile of evangelism the authors give *Good News People* a warm welcome, but critically so. The main

complaints are twofold. First, on definition, that while incarnation and proclamation are both necessary to evangelism, proclamation is downplayed. Second, on practice, the evangelist is domesticated within the boundary of the local church instead of being a pioneer beyond the boundary, yet linked to the church.

While this is an Anglican 'in-house' debate, charge 'diocese' to 'presbytery' and there are lessons for the Church of Scotland to learn from this booklet. Not least of these is raising the question, 'Where are our evangelists?'

Jared Hay, Balerno

Sharing Your Faith With A Friend

Michael Green

IVP, Leicester, 2002. 158pp. £5.99
ISBN 0-85111-278-1

This is a practical book that does exactly what it says on the cover! And it does it very well. The chapter headings detail the training the author takes us through: getting motivated, building bridges, starting the conversation, knowing the good news, becoming the midwife, handling the responses, offering the aftercare, avoiding the mistakes. In fact this book does more than it says on the cover because it is actually a great little manual on evangelism for the beginning of the twenty first century. As a minister actively involved in front-line evangelism in our community I found this book full of useful ideas and advice.

One of the reasons this is such a good book is because it is written by someone who is talking from experience. Michael Green knows what he is writing about because he has been one of Britain's most gifted evangelists for decades. Because he is also a theologian and a church pastor there is great balance and maturity too. He puts things clearly, simply and positively. In fact the only potential problem with what he writes is that he makes evangelism sound much easier than most of us find it!

I was also impressed with how bang up to date this book is. Michael Green has kept in touch with the modern world and shows in a number of places

how the methods we use in evangelism are having to adapt to our changing culture.

I think every minister would find this book a helpful primer on evangelism and I would also recommend it for those involved in running enquirers courses such as Christianity Explored and Alpha. Any church member with a desire to share the good news with their friends will also find this a very useful and inspiring book to read.

Richard McArthur, Balerno, Edinburgh

When is War Justified?

Andrew Goddard

Grove Ethics Series E 128
Grove Books Ltd, Cambridge, 2003,
28pp, £2.50
ISSN 1470-854X

A timely and accessible title. The author sets out to 'introduce the Just War Tradition (JWT) as a form of Christian moral reasoning and highlight its relevance at the start of the 21st C.' In particular he seeks to rescue the JWT from populist reductionism. A brief history of the origins and development of the JWT is provided, with a helpful reflection on how history has reconfigured the doctrine. There then follows interaction with current war issues – a post-September 11th world, smart bombs, 'live television' warfare, collateral damage, state terrorism – everything on the agenda before and during the recent conflict in Iraq seems to get a mention. Because of its brevity it is both tightly packed and limited in its scope; however the author does achieve his limited aims. The book's usefulness may have been improved by more interaction with Biblical material than one final paragraph allows, but overall, in a fast changing world, it is a helpful and thought-provoking statement for all who want to contribute meaningfully to the on-going debate. More details of Grove Books can be found on www.grovebooks.co.uk

David J McAdam, Glasgow

Book reviews

I was Just Wondering

Philip Yancey

Eagle Publishing Ltd., Surrey, 2001.
223pp. £7.99
ISBN 0 36347 460 8

The book is divided into six parts – the Human Animal; In the world; Among the Believers; Necessary Voices; Life with God; Another World. It contains short manageable chapters. Each of the six parts are preceded by a number of questions, related to the subject, to whet the reader's appetite. Yancey then goes on to discuss issues raised by the subject in question, and, although he does not answer the questions, he does give possible pointers to the reader. He does not shirk from exploring controversial issues including war, sexuality, other religions and suffering.

This book is not for the reader who likes to be 'spoon-fed'. Effort is required on the reader's part to start also to 'wonder'. In Yancey's own words it is 'a book of many questions and a few answers'. Perhaps the most positive aspect of this book is its ability to transfer Yancey's *I Was Just Wondering* to the reader's desire to ponder and think for himself on the deep issues which Yancey raises. Some of the chapters may also have the potential to be used as discussion starters in small group settings, although more wider reading would be required by the study leader to work through the issues raised.

Triona Busby, Edinburgh

Prayer, Praise and Prophecy – A Theology of the Psalms

Geoffrey Grogan

Christian Focus Publications, Fearn,
2001. 330pp.
ISBN 1 85792 642 0

This book is excellent! What is on the inside is exactly what it says on the cover! It is a book that you want to make time for and what is more, it's a book that both looks and feels good. It's been a joy to read and will be one that will be re-read because it is very

Book reviews

well written and accessible. Geoffrey Grogan manages to combine theological and scholarly depth with an easy style that makes this a book suitable for academic study, sermon preparation, personal devotion and edification.

The book takes us through the book of Psalms using the following structure:

A. Its General Features: This sets the Psalms in relation to the Old Testament and its importance, summarised by Luther's statement that the Psalms are the 'Old Testament in miniature'. These opening chapters are more 'academic', yet I think that a lay person would find value in referring to them.

B. Its Great Themes: These chapters provide insight into the God of the Psalms, creator, ruler, one who meets with and communicates with his people, protector, judge and refiner. There's great sermon material here!

C. Its Grand Design: The opening chapter of this section is perhaps of more immediate value to the theology student, yet is written in a way that anyone seriously wanting to get to grips with the Word of God could cope with.

The next chapters examine the main themes of the 5 books that constitute the Psalms, in ways that are useful for study, devotion and teaching.

D. Its Glorious Fulfilment: Covers the use of the Psalms in the New Testament and fulfilment of the prophetic in the person of Jesus, through His suffering and vindication. This is a helpful and stirring section of the book, having many applications.

Conclusion: The book finishes with a practical conclusion on how we should use the book of Psalms and ultimately I think that is what anyone who reads this book will want to do. I wholeheartedly recommend this book as a means of enriching devotion, worship and theology.

Ian Pittendreich, Ardnamurchan

But don't all religions lead to God?

Michael Green

IVP, Leicester, 2002. 92 pp. £5.99
ISBN 0 85111 281 1

With the sub-title, 'Navigating the multi-faith maze', Michael Green addresses issues in the current climate of religious confusion. The language is clear and crisp, and in surveying and analysing different religions he is both courteous and well informed. For the main part of the book he ably presents the evidence which makes Jesus so special – a teacher who claimed to bring God to us, who dealt with human wickedness, and who broke the final barrier of death. The chapter dealing with hard questions is particularly helpful, making this a useful book to lend to others.

Brian S Ringrose, Edinburgh

Discovering John's Letters

Dianne Tidball

Crossway books, Leicester, 2002.
154pp. £4.99
ISBN 1 85684211 8

'These days meeting together to study the Bible in groups appears to be a booming leisure time activity in many parts of the world. In the UK alone it is estimated that over one million people each week meet in home Bible-study groups'. With this claim, we are introduced to Dianne Tidball's *Discovering John's Letters* in the Crossway Bible Guides. While rejoicing in the growth of Bible study groups, one is also aware of the worrying trend seen in the decline of people subscribing to daily Bible reading notes. This fact, plus concern about Biblical illiteracy amongst professing Christians, suggests that not everything is as it could be in regards the people of God being shaped by the Word of God.

As with other contributions to the Crossway Bible Guides this volume covering the three letters of John's seeks to be a tool for personal and group study. It provides extended comment on each section of the letters as well as offering questions. Dianne Tidball forces the reader to deal with the words of John but she never loses

sight of how the Johannine text connects with the rest of Scripture.

This desire to help us understand John against the background of the whole of Scripture is achieved by providing various sections which allows the reader to stand back from the text. In the 'Digging deeper' section Tidball identifies some of the key themes within the letters and therefore we find topics such as 'The second coming', 'The unforgivable sin' and 'Christ – the atoning sacrifice'. The sections entitled 'Important Doctrines' are fewer in number but examples such as 'Sinlessness and sanctification' and 'Jesus – fully human and fully divine' reveal the concern of Tidball to provide thought provoking material to those who have a desire to be taught from Scripture.

While not its intended 'audience' the book is a useful tool for preachers and those who want to teach and expound these three letters. It also fulfils its primary aim of challenging Christians to study and learn from God's word and therefore is to be commended.

However, there are two areas of concern – one with the actual book, and the other with this type of book. The questions can be used either by individuals or by groups but there was a lack of 'practical' ideas as to how to apply the teaching of the letters. As with many sermons, the exposition does not lead to application.

Secondly, in a society that is abandoning books and reading, the church seems to be slow to respond to this challenge. How do we hear and listen to the Word in a non-book culture? Amongst those blessed with analytical minds and who are able to articulate and talk about their faith, the Crossway Bible Guides are excellent tools. But do they connect with those whose confidence in reading and discussion is lacking? Can appropriate materials which deal with Scripture as the inspired Word of God be developed?

Notwithstanding these two questions, Dianne Tidball's book is helpful and will be of use to individuals and groups. God willing, a rediscovery of

the power of his Word will be seen not as a leisure time activity but a life transforming experience.

Kenneth Stott, Dundee

The Church of the Living God

Wallace M. Alston Jr.

Westminster John Knox Pr., Louisville & London, 2002, 148pp. £14.99
ISBN 0 664 22553 5

The subtitle of this book is 'A Reformed Perspective'. The author is of course aware that the church is bigger than the reformed branch and most of the book is about that wider church with special note of the history and characteristics that distinguish the reformed perspective. It is a revised and updated edition of a book originally called 'The Church' and published in 1984.

The Reformed perspective of this book is the perspective of the Presbyterian Church (USA). It is a liberal perspective where the Bible as the written word of God is subordinate to the Word of God who is Jesus Christ. It sounds fine until you realise that all we know of Jesus Christ is contained in the written words of the Bible and if those words are not reliable then how reliable is our picture of Jesus? We are then dumped in the ever-changing sea of trying to discern what the Spirit is saying by our fallible reason, guided not by the Spirit of Christ but more often by the spirit of the age.

I also wondered who the book was written for because the author was always telling the reader what Christians believe about the Church. Is it assumed the readers are not Christians? I think it is much more to do with political correctness, a way of saying this is our perspective and the reader may have a different and equally valid perspective. By trying to include everyone the distinctive Reformed perspective is so broadened as to be meaningless, anaemic. Quite unlike the truths the Reformers were prepared to die for.

Having said that, there was much that was helpful, for example the section on page 115 as to why every Christian should be a theologian, because of the priesthood of all believers,

or the section on the minister as a politician, because the Church is basically a voluntary institution. But I would be careful who I give this book to because of how it downplays the authority of Scripture.

Klaus Buwert, Wishaw

Paul for Everyone: 2 Corinthians

Tom Wright

SPCK, London, 2003, 164pp. £8.99
ISBN 0-281-05306-5

This is a commentary written for, as Wright comments in the introduction, 'people who wouldn't normally read a book with footnotes and Greek words in it'. In this respect the author achieves his aim in producing a work that is lucid and clear, and laced with insightful anecdotes. Each chapter is presented in concise sections which are easily absorbed and which waste no time in getting to the distilled essence of the text. Wright presents Paul's painful struggles with the lively and volatile Corinthian believers in a way that reveals his own deep understanding of Paul and of the pastoral calling.

There is much that is good and helpful in this commentary and the style is warm and accessible, but there are some aspects of the work that cause unease and suggest the need for caution. Wright's references to Satan as 'the satan' are not fully explained but seem to be linked to what he detects as a 'quasi-personal' (p.162) view of evil in some Hebrew thought. What he does not do is to sharpen the focus that Scripture clearly brings in the very personal encounter of Jesus with Satan in Matthew 4/Luke 4. The references to this encounter are given in the Glossary, but the reader is still left little confused as to just what Wright means.

A deeper concern surrounds the absence of capital letters when referring to the Holy Spirit even where there is little doubt that the Holy Spirit is the subject. If the reason for this practice is genuine doubt as to whether Paul is referring to the Holy Spirit or the human spirit in parts of the text, then it surely remains the responsibility of the commentator to clarify? Whatever

Book reviews

Wright's reasons for this practice (and no clear explanation is given) the effect is negative. The question persists, what is Wright saying about the deity / personhood of the Holy Spirit in his use of the lower case? Or at the very least, what is the perception that this practice leaves with the reader?

Jim Turrent, Culloden

Dying and Grieving – A Guide to Pastoral Ministry

Alan Billings

SPCK, London, 2002, 166pp. £12.99
ISBN 0-281-05526-2

The writer claims that his book is aimed at clergy but also members of congregations who may become involved in conducting funerals and bereavement visiting. The main quest of the author is to answer the questions, 'What can Christianity say about death that might carry conviction in today's increasingly secularised society?' and 'How should pastoral practice change to meet changing needs?'

After almost 30 years of ministry and having conducted thousands of funerals, I approached this book with some scepticism. However it is well written, easy to read and very challenging in many regards. He gives an excellent review of the way practices and beliefs have changed over the past one hundred years. The author comes from a liberal theological tradition, but I found that I too had slipped into some of the more questionable practices of a post-Christian society and that has made me rethink and rework my funeral practices.

Apart from allowing clergy to review their own practices, the book could be extremely valuable for use in groups interested in bereavement work; there are questions posed at the end of each chapter which could be valuable for individuals and groups.

Bill Armitage, Edinburgh

Book reviews

The Snake in the Grass

Kathleen Long Bostrom
Westminster John Knox Press,
Louisville & London, 2003. 47pp.
ISBN 0 664 22592 6

The Snake in the Grass is a charming retelling for children of the biblical story of Adam and Eve. Told by Eve, the story covers most of the salient points of the Bible story without too much licence in the embellishments. The story is told in such a way as to make clear the issues of trust, disobedience, guilt and blame. The addition of the 'moral' at the end of the tale provides an opportunity for the personal application of the lessons learned in the story. What is perhaps missing however, is the report of God's provision of clothing indicating both his love and a covering for their shame.

There is a lot of humour in the story and the catchy rhythm engages the reader's attention and calls for the turn of each new page. This sing-song style of poetry will also help children to remember the story as, with each re-reading of the book, the lines become more and more familiar and embedded in their memory.

The colourful illustrations are an aid both to the humour and the comprehension of the story.

This book is versatile in that it would suit a number of uses. It is equally suited to young readers or to parents who wish to read to their preschoolers. It would be a valuable tool for any school or church library and would make a delightful presentation gift. It would provide the material for a children's talk or school lesson and the format of the four characters would lend itself to being delivered by a drama group as with Nick Page's *The Baker*.

I thoroughly enjoyed reading this book and look forward to reading it to my daughter.

Sharon Taylor, Livingston

Seeing God in the Ordinary

Michael Frost
Hendrickson, Massachusetts, 2002.
197pp.
ISBN 1-56563-514-0

The desire to reconcile the sacred and the secular in our everyday lives is a time-honoured quest and one which this book seeks to address. Mindful that the church's emphasis is largely upon the miraculous, the author appeals for an awareness that the God who created us with all our faculties also reveals himself to us in the ordinary details of our lives. We are encouraged to look for God not only in the more obvious realms of nature, art, literature, and music but also in good food, in conversation, in car journeys and in gardening tasks.

Some aspects of the book really do challenge the critical processes. The chapter on 'The Power of Stories' is a particularly useful one and, I believe, the reader will never again watch 'innocent' old films like *The Sound of Music* without an analytical examination of his/her response. The plea for us to emulate our Master in his identification with the working man in his place of work and recreation, whilst demonstrating the power of God's kingdom, is a timely one. Thus the chapter 'Seeing Christ in Others' is particularly humbling as it challenges us in our preconceived attitudes to the people we encounter.

However, some of the expressions used seem unnecessarily provocative. To describe John Wesley's conversion experience in Aldersgate Street as 'the liberating experience of God's pleasure' seems a milk-and-water mockery of what Wesley himself describes as an 'assurance – that He had saved me from the law of sin and death'. Likewise to describe God's revelation as 'God making a pass at us' or to assert that God is 'amazed by our complexities' sends very mixed messages about the character of our great God, and there is sometimes a glaring failure to distinguish between the profane and the secular.

The desire of this somewhat repetitive book to experience God at work

in our 'prose flattened' world is not original. Indeed it takes the author nearly 200 pages to say what George Herbert, four centuries earlier, said in eight lines:

Teach me, my God and King,
In all things thee to see,
And what I do in anything,
To do it as for thee.

A servant with this clause
Makes drudgerie divine:
Who sweeps a room, as for thy laws,
Makes that and th' action fine.

The Elixir

Quaint language now but a rather more succinct grasp of truth.

Sheila Steele, Bangor, Co. Down.